Do we really need (yet) another book on the philosophy of (social) science? Surely, we can find all that we need to know in existing tomes such as those of Kuhn (1962), Lakatos (1980), and Popper (1976). Haven't the likes of Brady and Collier (2012); King, Keohane and Verba (1994); and Marsh and Stoker (2010) said all that needs to be said about the philosophy and method of political science specifically? We do, indeed, need this book. *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science* is Keith Dowding's approach to the conduct of political science research, developed through decades of successful work in the UK and Australia. Although there is no shortage of work along these lines, Dowding's should be in the top of the pile because of its unique combination of philosophical insight, open-mindedness, and hands-on usefulness.

One of Dowding's core motivations in writing *The Philosophy and Methods* is his observation that political scientists are not particularly well-versed in philosophy, an affliction that often leads us to make naïve inferences. In general, this point rings true. In many ways, Dowding's book is a political science 'instruction manual' intended to aid students and anyone else interested in the topic. As a PhD student in the US in the early 2000s, *The Philosophy and Methods* certainly would have been valuable as I tried to link the heavily methods-focused training I was acquiring to key understandings in the philosophy of science. It
would have provided guidance on key questions every researcher has at one point or another, such as ‘what is the difference between a theory and a hypothesis?’ ‘what is the best course of action when my theory has no evidence but I am fairly certain it is correct?’ and so on. Today, in a discipline where methods and data are increasingly easy to come by, but also increasingly complex, a firm grounding in the philosophy of science is as important as ever.

What does *The Philosophy and Methods* offer to scholars who rely primarily on quantitative analysis as their main tool for conducting research? This is the key question explored in this review. For starters, Dowding’s approach to ‘isms’ (which he understands as a shorthand for a way of looking at the world) is particularly refreshing, and even liberating. He begins chapter 2, ‘Isms,’ by warning that he does not like isms and would have preferred not to have the chapter in the book at all. Why? Because isms mean different things to different people, which often leads commentators to become embroiled in debates about how an author has demarcated each ism, when it would be more fruitful to engage with the ideas themselves. Additionally, Dowding wanted to avoid inciting debates about the ‘true character’ of isms, which is not productive either.

Nonetheless, thankfully, Dowding presents us with a chapter on ‘isms,’ as his students convinced him that such a section would aid them in understanding what others have written. His overview of the various doctrines is insightful, but even more helpful is his take on what readers should *do* with that information. In a nutshell, Dowding advises that we should not take isms too seriously or let them acquire a godlike character. Any ism, he professes, is “bound to be a
summary statement of an inconsistent set of claims.” Nor should we let isms infect our beliefs.

This is sage advice. Like the author, I have never been of the view that scholars need to be wedded to a particular ism. Political scientists should aim to understand better how the world works; why people and institutions do what they do. If a particular theory explains X well but does not elucidate Y, researchers should not be constricted by an analytical straightjacket that forces them to embrace a particular doctrine or dogma. Hence, Dowding’s treatment of isms is most welcome, and I would encourage doubting scholars to take his advice. (Indeed, this kind of open-mindedness can be found throughout the book, and it is refreshing). There is a danger of hodge-podgeism here, however. How can we embrace eclecticism of isms while remaining theoretically/methodologically coherent? What research process(es) can we develop to avoid said hodge-podgeism? A more thorough treatment of those questions would have enhanced the book.

Dowding’s chapter on ‘Methods and Methodologies’ will prove particularly useful to scholars who rely chiefly on quantitative analysis. Here, too, the author’s perspective is heartening. Pluralism in research, he states, does not mean that we must all be pluralist. Rather, it simply requires that we respect that other scholars tackle the same topic with different objectives and employ different analytic techniques. In other words, although we do not each need to do in-depth interviews, formal modelling, field experiments, archival research, and
large-scale cross-national data analysis, we do need to engage with scholars who approach things differently.

In a research world where students feel pressured to adapt their advisors’ worldview and/or approach to theory testing, and reviewers are more critical of approaches that are not their preferred ones, this is refreshing. There can, of course, be challenges in practice, as it can be difficult to have conversations with individuals who speak very different languages (literally and figuratively) from the one to which we are accustomed. Engaging with a very complex formal model, for example, can be very hard for those with little or no training – or even for those whose training is rusty. This is one reason why non-specialist summaries such as those found in The Washington Post’s ‘Monkey Cage’ and ‘The Policy Space,’ written in language accessible to broad political science audiences as well as policymakers and journalists, have gained such traction.

Rather than advocate for the use of one method(ology) or another, the ‘Methods and Methodologies’ chapter is dedicated chiefly to providing an overview (including challenges, pros, and cons) of the various approaches on offer. It will be particularly useful to postgraduate students wishing to get the lay of the land without being explicitly told to reside in one territory or another. This can be somewhat frustrating for some scholars (wherever they are in their career progression), who might want specific guidance or even instruction on which method(ology) is best suited to their area or question of interest. In general, The Philosophy and Methods is not that kind of book, which is a good thing, but can be frustrating. Dowding is not interested in providing rigid prescriptions to his
readers. He is far more intent on describing the menu of available options, encouraging researchers to be intellectually playful as well as skeptical, and pointing out the hazards that might lie in the way.

*The Philosophy and Methods* provides a number of additional tips on how to be a good political scientist. Below are some of the most interesting and compelling: First, “A good detailed description can be much more fruitful and enlightening than a half-assed attempt at testing such a complex theory.”¹ Political scientists (or at least those trained in the rational choice approach) are obsessed with causal inference. In general, that is for the better (although we often struggle to test causal theories because there are limits to what statistics can tell us about causality). We learn early-on that descriptive work is inferior to and should be made into causal work. If the reader disagrees with the empirical truth of that statement, he/she need only to consider the large number of articles in top journals that clearly started out as descriptive studies but had thinly-developed causal story tacked on to please reviewers/editors.

The author urges us to feel free to ‘just describe’ where appropriate. This is liberating! Description can lead us to predictions: “What we are doing is finding patterns in the world [...] so we can predict what is going to happen.”² Predictions, in turn, (can) lead us to explanations. Being open-minded about description might make us more receptive to new explanations that we might otherwise have been too blindfolded by conventional wisdoms to notice.

¹ P. 68.
² P. 43.
Second, Dowding advises, you can’t beat something with nothing, an insight he draws from Popper (1976). He cautions that if the evidence does not support a hypothesis, unless the researcher has something with which to replace it, he/she should not give up on it yet. Instead, Dowding recommends, the researcher should modify the model to encompass the negative result. This is interesting advice; how many times has each of us given up too early on a hypothesis? Yet, it is difficult to know how to implement this advice in practice. I do not always agree with Dowding’s advice here. Some hypotheses are, simply put, wrong. They should be thrown out with the bath water, even in the absence of a replacement. More advice on how to know when that is the case would have been useful.

Third, “The importance is in the story, the narrative, or the mechanism that explains the relative stability. The empirical generalisation ... is what follows from the mechanism.”3 This is sage and relatively straightforward advice. Scholars’ quest for generalisable statements has often led them to avoid the nitty-gritty of individual cases. This is a shame, as story-telling is what puts flesh on vague concepts and oftentimes helps us to understand the underlying process. Story-telling also breathes life into the regression tables that often populate our research. This insight about story-telling has important implications for how we train our postgraduate students (as well as our best undergraduates). Indeed, it suggests that we need to encourage them to tool up on methods as well as becoming well-versed in several cases (or countries, etc.).

3 P. 115.
Another interesting idea is Dowding’s ‘inversion strategy,’ a diagnostic he advises to assess how interesting and testable a hypothesis is. His suggestion: the researcher should take each hypothesis he/she wishes to test, and invert it. Does anyone believe the inverted hypothesis? If no, the original hypothesis is probably trivial. If the inverted seems as plausible, the research should be posed as a question and both the original hypothesis and its inverse should be tested.

Consider an application. Suppose one has a hypothesis that zebras have stripes. Using the inversion strategy, the alternate hypothesis is that zebras do not have stripes. The fact that no one believes the latter should serve as an alarm bell: the hypothesis is insignificant. Next, suppose that I realize that I am better at political science than I am at zoology, and therefore devise a more consequential hypothesis: that Britons were more likely to vote to exit the EU if they lived in an area with a high percentage of immigrants. Does anyone believe the opposite, that Brexit support was higher in low-immigration areas? Certainly. Both are plausible. Indeed, the answer provides interesting insight into voters’ motivations and how interaction with immigrants affects political preferences, ecological inference problems aside (King 1997).

Of course, there are a few criticisms to raise about The Philosophy and Methods. For instance, Dowding maintains that qualitative case studies have low leverage because they explain a single event with a great deal of detail. While this may be true, I disagree with his inference that we should give these studies more leverage by boiling them down to their essence. For me, case studies’ ‘thickness’ – their complexity, their intricacy, and the range of detail needed to truly grasp
what is taking place – is what makes them useful and exciting. I would (within reason) usually prefer more to less.

An additional problem – or perhaps more a word of caution – is that the book is very dense. Given that it aspires, at least in part, to be a postgraduate student’s manual, this is a potential problem. Instructors who assign this book should not expect their postgraduate students to digest it easily in large quantities. They should assign it in (multiple) small quantities throughout the course of an academic term, with plenty of discussion. A more thorough exploration of experimental methods would also have enhanced the book. Is the move to this type of causal testing in political science a good thing? How can researchers design experiments that ensure, insofar as possible, external validity? What advice does the author have for tackling the challenges of data transparency and reproducibility in experimental research? No book can do everything, of course. But as experimental political science research gains in popularity, these questions need well thought-out answers, informed by the philosophy of science and social science. That is a gap in this book.

In summary, The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science is a superbly written and very useful instruction manual for political scientists. Although perhaps most beneficial to PhD students, it grapples with issues of relevance to scholars at any stage of their careers. Sprinkled with just the right amount of dry humour, it also gives the reader a good chuckle from time to time – no small feat for any academic book.
References


