Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics

The academic study of politics seems endlessly beset by debates about method. We hear of qualitative scholars versus quantitative scholars; of institutionalists versus students of political culture; of rational choice theorists versus everyone else. At the core of all these debates is a single unifying concern: should political scientists view themselves primarily as scientists, developing ever more sophisticated tools and studying only those phenomena to which such tools may fruitfully be applied? Or should we instead try to illuminate the large, complicated, untidy problems thrown up in the world, even if the chance of offering definitive explanations is low? Is there necessarily a tension between these two endeavors? Are some domains of political inquiry more amenable to the building up of reliable, scientific knowledge than others, and if so, how should we deploy our efforts? In this collection of essays, some of the world’s most prominent students of politics offer original discussions of these pressing questions, eschewing narrow methodological diatribes to explore what political science is and how political scientists should aspire to do their work.

Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics is essential reading for anyone who cares about advancing rigorous understanding of the most important political problems and choices of our time. It is the first in a series of projected volumes growing out of the Yale University Political Science Initiative on “Rethinking Political Order.” Future volumes will include Crafting and Operating Institutions; Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances; Order, Conflict, and Violence; Representation and Popular Rule; and Distributive Politics.

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In memory of Gabriel A. Almond
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