Political Science in Paraguay: Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Age

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I. Introduction

The development of Political Science in Paraguay has faced multiple challenges since the opening of the first program in this area in 1993 at the Catholic University "Nuestra Señora de la Asunción". Although the career is taught in the main universities of the country, the faculty in these institutions tends to remain made up by professionals without specific training in the discipline, while the syllabuses are outdated. This makes up for an institutional context that is not conducive to the development of Political Science in the country, which has had scarce progress so far.

On the other hand, universities in Paraguay don't promote research as a regular basis for the development of knowledge in the Social Sciences. This has created a situation where the teaching of the discipline involves memorized repetitions of pre-established material, generally lacking any critical thinking. Thus, the successive cohorts of Political Sciences students in this country are educated without acquiring the theoretical or methodological tools necessary to do research in this area.

In this context, student access to digital tools and online learning platforms provide a window of opportunity for academic development in the area, as these resources allow the continuous training of professionals beyond the institutional framework of the universities as well as opportunities to participate in international research projects, which provides a margin for their specialization in practice in a way that wasn't possible before. Information technology is thus essential for the development of Political Science in Paraguay.[1]

1   According to the "Survey on Internet Access and Use in Paraguay" carried out by the National Bureau of Information and Communication Technologies (SENATICs), 59.8% of respondents regularly use desktops or notebooks, 70.5% of which do it mostly at home, 26.7% at work and only 15.0% at the faculty. In turn, 58.8% indicate using these tools to seek information and 43.4% to work. On the other hand, 96.6% of the respondents use mobile devices, this being the main tool to connect online of 98.5% of the respondents. When comparing responses by age group, the use of these resources is higher among younger respondents, which reflects its growing potential as a vehicle for teaching and scientific research.

We now present an exploratory work focused on the way in which the digital era presents opportunities and challenges for Political Science in Paraguay, in the context of weak institutions of higher education. After performing a brief review of the state of the discipline in the country, we will identify the current use of digital tools both in the process of teaching the discipline as well as in research in the area, emphasizing the opportunities that they present and also highlighting the challenges that they imply. To do so, we review documentary and testimonial information related to both the Catholic University and the National University of Asuncion, which are the main higher learning institutions that Political Science programs on a regular basis (Duarte Recalde, 2015, p.168).

II. Political Science in Paraguay

As it has been mentioned, Political Science in Paraguay still faces the challenge of its institutional development (Altman, 2005; Rocha Carpiuc, 2013; Duarte Recalde, 2015). This situation coincides with the weak institutional development that affects all the scientific activity in the country. According to the most recent report of the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), the total investment in Science and Technology in relation to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Paraguay in 2015 was 0.13%, this being the highest percentage registered since this indicator began to be measured in 2001 (CONACYT, 2016a). Political Science in particular, as well as the Social Sciences, face a state of backwardness in its scientific institutionalization due to: "(1) the low social recognition of its scientific status; (2) its low institutionalization in the university; (3) the weakness of mechanisms for disseminating research results; and (4) the lack of links between social research and public policies" (Ortíz and Galeano, 2015, p.7).

As it happened in other Latin American countries during the 20th century, the development of Social Sciences in Paraguay was affected negatively by the suppression of critical thinking that occurred under dictatorial rule.[2] Throughout that historical period, any public expression that questioned social reality was persecuted and suppressed, while any criticism of the regime was interpreted as part of as communist political project. This resulted in many Paraguayan intellectuals being exiled and developing their academic careers away from the country. For that reason, the breakdown of the authoritarian regime in 1989 did not imply an automatic return of these actors to the country, or to

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2   In Paraguay, the rule of Alfredo Stroessner lasted from 1954 to 1989.

their analysis of Paraguayan politics from an academic perspective.

Nowadays, Paraguay's two main universities –the Catholic University and the National University of Asuncion– regularly offer programs in Political Science at a graduate level.[3] However, neither program has a syllabus of its own: in the case of the National University, all subjects up to the fourth semester are shared between Political Science and the Social Sciences program, while in the Catholic University subjects are shared with Sociology and History throughout the full five years of the program.[4] At the same time, when comparing the curricula of both programs[5] it is possible to observe a markedly legalistic bias of the National University, compared to the rather sociological bias of the Catholic University's program. Either way, in both cases the lack of independence of the discipline appears as a persistent feature.

The specificity of Political Science as a discipline different from Law or Sociology has not yet been recognized by a large part of the Paraguayan academic community, a perception that coincides with the limited social value given to the discipline outside academia. The teaching of Political Science is not structured according to specialized disciplinary criteria and, frequently, the theoretical and methodological debates present in the international academic circles are absent in the country. Teaching in the area is then led by legalistic or sociological biases that reflect the education of those who teach the different subjects in their curricula, posing continuous challenges to the existence of Political Science as an autonomous discipline. While the influence of classic legal-institutional approaches in teaching make it difficult to overcome normative stands in the study of politics, the preeminence of sociological analysis of political phenomena have influenced the trivialization of its object (Duarte Recalde, 2015, p.168).

Moreover, academic production in this discipline has limited institutional support from Paraguayan universities and teaching is not necessarily linked to research in the area. The Paraguayan academic production in Social Sciences in general occurs outside universities, either in Think Tanks backed by international organizations or as part of specific government projects that seek to address particular social issues. The universities that offer Political Science degrees do not have full-time

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3   There are further institutions of higher learning in the country that at some point have offered Political Science either at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, but there are no records of their regular existence in time.
4   While in the Catholic University there are specific subjects that make up the Political Science, Sociology or History curricula, teachers of those subjects do not necessarily have a specialized background in those areas. Also, in practice, students of either program choose to study them indistinctly as a means to complete the number of academic credits required by the university.
5   Both programs are listed in the Appendix to this essay.

teaching or researching posts, and students aren't dedicated exclusively to their education (Ortíz and Galeano, 2015, p.8).

As a result, the lines of research present in the country tend to develop in a manner that is dependent on funding –generally made available through civil society organizations– which hinders the development of autonomous lines of research. Given the limited development of Political Science in Paraguay, epistemological debates about analytical, theoretical or methodological frameworks that have been developed in the Latin American academy (Rocha Carpiuc, 2013) remain absent in the Paraguayan case.

In this context, digital tools present important opportunities both for teaching and researching, which could help to strengthen Political Science in this country. The increasingly better use of these tools by the incipient number of professionals in the area poses a favorable scenario for the institutional development of the discipline, parallel to an academic production that increases in number and quality among local Political Scientists. In turn, growth in academic production and its availability online have a positive impact on the learning opportunities of Political Science students, who are no longer constrained by the bibliographic materials they access through the university and can be aware of main theoretical and methodological debates happening in the discipline beyond the national borders, even getting to work with colleagues from other countries, advancing in their understanding of the field.

III. Teaching of Political Science

The digital revolution still does not play a major role in Paraguay's higher education, as digital tools are still taken advantage of only marginally. There is little integration of information technologies in the classroom or as a didactic element outside of it, and are often used as an addition to the vertical transmission of information.

Although universities have the technological resources to use virtual platforms to organize courses, the effective use of this technology is not widespread and there are very few teachers who use it for this purpose in the area. The use of the Internet, in particular, is directed more towards the search for bibliography as a complement to the basic materials of each class or material not available in printed form at the universities. At the same time, there is a tendency to increase formal online

communication between professors and students, while also increasing the informal interaction between them. However, establishing digital means of communication depends on the will of each teacher and cannot be considered to be a regular practice. The incipient use of digital tools for teaching affects Political Science, though not in a different way from other areas of knowledge.

There are no major differences in terms of digital infrastructure between the mentioned universities. Internet access in these places, although free, it is not strong enough to be used as didactic element; Internet speed is not fast or stable enough for video-conferences, online access to audio-visual materials or the search of bibliographical sources in real time. For these reasons, teachers who want to take advantage of digital tools need to use their particular resources to find and obtain beforehand all the material that they consider necessary for their classes. There are also no policies to introduce these tools to the higher learning process in a systematic manner.

Teaching of research methods does not take advantage of digital resources for data analysis either. Although universities do have computer labs, they do not promote the use of digital instruments to analyze quantitative or qualitative data. The use of digital resources as methodological tools is limited to its introductory level, when used at all, as a reflection of the dated education practices of those responsible to teach them. Thus, the use of information technology in Political Science research faces challenges on several levels: the programs are not research-oriented, teachers that usually teach them have not been specifically educated in the area, while the few of those that have been educated in Political Science hardly ever do research in the areas they teach. Furthermore, there isn't any specialized library in Political Science in the country that could have a digital counterpart, and neither teachers nor students have access to databases, online libraries or scientific journals, unless they are able to access them by their own means.

However, students in Paraguay do have access to digital teaching platforms developed by foreign institutions. Through the virtual availability of programs related to Political Science that are unavailable in the country, Paraguayan students who are unable to travel in order to further their education abroad take advantage of virtual platforms in order to improve their education, which enables them to become part of an international academic community in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Such platforms offer access to curricula and bibliography that are also used by other students and professionals when shared, thus generating positive externalities for the development of the discipline in the country.

With regard to aspects of curricular content, topics related to the digital revolution or the political importance of the digitalization of information have not yet been included as subjects in Political Science programs. This is mainly due to the fact that such programs have not been updated since before the information technologies gained importance as vehicles for political activism, or as a tool used to strengthen the links of representation, which happened in recent years (Welp, 2016, p.220).

However, there are some references to this phenomenon as part of different subjects in both universities that have been observed. Subjects related to Interest Groups, Public Opinion and Elections in the Catholic University, make reference to the power of the media in agenda setting as well as the Internet as a basic component of the information society. In the case of the National University, the program includes the subject "Computer Science and Political Science", though it's rather intended to train students in the use of digital tools as resources for work.

The reality described above presents a context of greater opportunities for the development of Political Science in Paraguay, as a byproduct of growing access to academic resources via information technologies. Such opportunities, however, will bear no effect as long as there is no optimal use of the resources at hand, so backwardness is inevitable as a result of the current way the discipline is taught and the infrastructure made available by the universities.

There are possibilities of improvement in sight, due to the process of certification and accreditation of the programs that has been initiated at the national level. So far, no Political Science program in the country is certified by the National Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ANEAES)[6], similar to other programs of the Social Sciences and Humanities. Thus, if a policy of certifying university programs becomes stable in time, the specialization of Political Science would occur as a result of this process.

IV. Research in Political Science

The digital revolution plays a major role in the situation of Political Science research in Paraguay. The possibilities of interaction between researchers through digital channels greatly facilitates collective initiatives and working on joint projects, even when members of the same project are

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6 Available at http://www.aneaes.gov.py/aneaes/index.php/ct-menu-item-12/carreras-acreditadas

outside the country. It also facilitates collaboration between Paraguayan researchers and their peers located in other countries, allowing Paraguayan political scientists to be part of international research networks that positively influence their professional development.

Like teaching, research is nourished by access to online data and bibliography, so the impetus that research in the area is gaining is largely due to access to these resources. Academic production, however, continues to be limited by the structural conditions in which university teachers do work. No full-time university professors have been found in either of the revised programs, and the work is limited to teaching a limited number of hours per week for which they're hired per semester, with contracts that are generally renewable but do not imply job stability necessarily.

On the other hand, up until recently, to have access to teaching posts didn't require any verifiable research background. This practice has improved since the National Program of Incentive to Researchers (PRONII) has been established. This program takes into account the level of formal education reached by its members, their participation in academic events, as well as their number of published work in indexed journals and books, as criteria to become part of the list of researchers officially recognized by CONACYT, as well as to further advance in their professional scheme. Although it is not yet required that university professors are recognized by PRONII, this is already valued as a requisite to work in different projects taking place in the country.

The limited number of published work by Paraguayan political scientists is also related to the absence of academic journals specialized in the area, as well as the scarce availability of journals in Social Sciences and Humanities (Table 1). According to the scientific research journals information system LATINDEX, there are only seven journals in Paraguay that publish work in the Social Sciences, of which only two –ACADEMO "Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities" and "Studies of Public Policies"– specifically mention Political Science as one of the areas covered in their published articles. In turn, only two out of the seven journals are available online[7], so the reach of the works published in the other five is very limited.

For these reasons, research done by Paraguayan political scientists is generally published outside the country, either in academic journals or as book chapters. Because it isn't a common practice to have professional websites to showcase their work, the published works of Paraguayan political

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7   However, the website of the journal edited by the American University was not operational at the time of writing this essay.

scientists are found mainly on online platforms created for that purpose, which are usually of free access.

Table 1: Scientific journals in Paraguay related to Political Science

Name	Editorial	Starting year	Subtopics	Online
ACADEMO Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities	American University	2014	Political Science and Public Administration, Communication Sciences, Education, Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, Multidisciplinary	Yes
Public Policy Studies	Public Policy Center, Catholic University "Nuestra Señora de la Asunción"	2012	Political Science and Public Administration	No
Paraguayan Studies	Center for Anthropological Studies, Catholic University "Nuestra Señora de la Asunción"	1973	Social Sciences and Humanities	No
Novapolis	Arandura	2007	Social Sciences and Humanities, Gender Studies, Local Studies, Sociology	No
REVICSO - Journal of Research in Social Sciences	Ediciones y Artes S.A.	2014	Antropology, Education, Geography, Sociology	No
International Journal of Social Science Research	Autonomous University of Asunción	2011	Sociology, Education	Yes
Journal on Studies and Research of Academic Knowledge	National University of Itapúa	2006	Pedagogy, Medicine, Finance, Epidemiology, Higher Education, Education, Economics, Culture, Science and Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities	No

Source: Information made available by LATINDEX

On the other hand, the digitization of information allows for easier access to it, which in principle would facilitate the incipient research work done in the country. By way of example, the digitization of Paraguayan legislative documents allows for easier access to them through online platforms, so analysis of Paraguayan recent legislation has benefited from these resources. In contrast, information regarding the management of the Paraguayan bureaucracy is very difficult to access despite a law passed in 2014 that establishes the citizen's right to freely access public information and promotes government transparency. State agencies still do not have the capacity to provide a lot of the information required for academic purposes, while the little information available so far tends to be incomplete and is insufficient to carry out longitudinal analysis.

Political research in Paraguay has not yet studied the effect of information technologies on political practice, although this is topic is already being addressed by recent interdisciplinary projects in other areas. In this regard, there are a small number of projects carried out by the Faculty of Science and Technology of the Catholic University, along with civil society organizations as well as public agencies, that aim to identify behavioral parameters in citizen participation processes. Early initiatives that look into the role of information technologies as a channels to enhance citizen's participation are not followed by analysis in Political Science. Thus, the links between information technologies and the world of politics remain unattended and unexplained from a Political Science perspective, which is also the case with many other topics relevant in the region's research agenda.

The main risk posed by information technologies to research in Paraguay is related to the unethical use of these resources. On the one hand, there is still no student training for the critical selection of reliable sources; some cases have been mentioned of students that commit plagiarism by presenting complete sections of articles published online as their own work. The task of training researchers in the proper use of these sources is still pending, with much needed emphasis on the social and ethical value of the original research.

V. Final remarks

Despite the many challenges to teaching and research in Political Science in Paraguay, access to information and communication technologies has a predominantly positive effect in the incipient institutionalization of the discipline in the country. These resources have allowed Paraguayan political scientists to further their education and develop academic careers in this area, despite working in a context of institutional weakness of the Paraguayan academy in general, and that of Political Science in particular. Digital resources offer professionals as well as students the opportunity to access the most recent academic production worldwide, allowing them to be aware of the main lines of research currently underway, theoretical developments and advances in current research techniques, helping them become part of an international academic community in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

The scene is set so that the quality of specialized teaching in the discipline will occur along the incorporation of digital tools to this process, coinciding with an increasing academic production in the area. However, this potential will only be realized to the extent that there is enough critical mass

to use these tools in a way that has a positive impact on academic life. Thus, as long as teaching is not supported by a research background, the use of information technologies will have a limited impact in the development of Paraguayan academia in the foreseeable future.

Moreover, the development of Political Science will remain conditioned by the way in which technological tools are incorporated at all education levels in the country, since universities are not detached from the educational process as a whole. A pedagogical appropriation of digital tools needs to occur in order for the whole academic community to take proper advantage of them, which poses a challenge beyond a particular disciplinary field.

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Appendix: Curricula of the Political Science programs in Paraguay

National University of Asuncion	Catholic University "Nuestra Señora de la Asuncion"
Semester 1	
Communication and Writing in the Spanish Language; History of Paraguay; Guaraní Language I; Introduction to the Legal Science; History of legal institutions; Latin American Social History; Introduction to Sociology; Seminar: Sociology of Work	Oral and written communication; History of Paraguay; Math; Symbolic Logic; Methodology; Introduction to Paraguayan Social Reality; Philosophical Anthropology; Faith and Science; Christian Mystery I
Semester 2	
Introduction to Political Science; Guaraní Language II; Political economy; Paraguayan Political History	Introduction to Political Science; Comparative Politics I; Introduction to National Reality; Introduction to Historical Science
Semester 3	
Economic and Political Analysis; Paraguayan Social History; Guaraní Language III; Elements of Statistics; Seminar: Interdisciplinary Approaches	Christian Anthropology; Political Science and its Evolution; Introduction to History I; Epistemology and Methodology of Research I; Statistics for the Social Sciences I; Philosophical Anthropology; Introduction to Social Theory I; Theory of Knowledge; Introduction to the Theory of Science I
Semester 4	
Methodology in Social Science; Statistics for the Social Sciences; Economic development; Guaraní Language IV; Seminar: Political Philosophy	Statistics for the Social Sciences II; Introduction to History II; Epistemology and Research Methodology II; Introduction to Social Theory II; Fundamental Ethics and Theology;
Semester 5	
History of Political Ideas I; Constitutional Law; History of International Relations; Foreign Language I; Seminar: Human Rights; Social Policy Research; Theory of the State	International Politics I; World History I; Epistemology and Methodology of Research III; English for Social Sciences I; Social Theory I; Comparative Politics II
Semester 6	
History of Political Ideas II; Political Process and Ideologies; Rights and International Relations; Foreign Language II; Seminar: Ethics and Politics; Social political theory; Rule of Law, Culture, Development and Business Policies in Paraguay	Social Thought of the Church I; World History I; International Politics II; Epistemology and Methodology of Research IV; Seminar; Economic Theory I; Social Theory II
Semester 7	

Computer Science and Political Science; Theories of Power; Political Law; Research Project Development; Foreign Language III; Interest Groups and Intermediate Societies

Social Thought of the Church II; Theory of the State; Economic Theory II; Contemporary Political Science; Cultural Systems; Social Theory III; Paraguayan Economic and Social History I

Semester 8

National Politics; Geopolitics; Foreign Language IV; Participation and Electoral Systems; Public Administration and Finance; Seminar: Analysis of Political Regimes, Democracy and its Challenges; Seminar: Workshop for the Elaboration of Thesis; International organizations

Demography; Political parties; Latin Americana Political Theory

Semester 9

Design and Practice of Political Research I; Paraguayan Political System; Interest Groups; Optional Seminar

Semester 10

Paraguayan International Policy; Design and Practice of Political Research I; Theory of Democracy; Public Opinion and Elections