

Austrian and Swiss Foreign Policy: A Comparison and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) appears to have become quite marginal in academic political science research, not only in Austria, but also in other countries, such as neighboring Switzerland or Germany. In this essay I argue that, contrary to conventional wisdom, this is not primarily due to the fact that scholars based in these countries and their research have internationalized, and that Austria and Switzerland are too small to really matter in international politics and thus be of academic interest. Rather, it derives from two conditions: first, continued adherence of many if not most FPA scholars to interpretational (hermeneutical) research methods, which have become rather peripheral in modern political science; and second, limited creativity of political scientists focused on causal explanation and statistical analysis in coming up with new and interesting FPA questions and appropriate study designs. This argument is illustrated with examples from FPA as reflected in two recent books on foreign policy in Austria and Switzerland respectively, and suggestions on several areas where political scientists could add valuable insights that are both academically interesting and policy relevant.

Keywords

Foreign policy analysis, Switzerland, Austria, methods, research agenda

Österreichische und Schweizer Außenpolitik: Ein Vergleich und eine Forschungsagenda

Zusammenfassung

Die Analyse der Außenpolitik (FPA) scheint in der akademischen politikwissenschaftlichen Forschung ziemlich marginal geworden zu sein, nicht nur in Österreich, sondern auch in anderen Ländern wie der benachbarten Schweiz oder Deutschland. In diesem Aufsatz vertrete ich die Ansicht, dass dies entgegen der landläufigen Meinung nicht in erster Linie darauf zurückzuführen ist, dass sich die in diesen Ländern ansässigen Wissenschaftler:innen und ihre Forschung internationalisiert haben und dass Österreich und die Schweiz zu klein sind, um in der internationalen Politik wirklich eine Rolle zu spielen und somit von wissenschaftlichem Interesse zu sein. Vielmehr ist dies auf zwei Bedingungen zurückzuführen: erstens auf das anhaltende Festhalten vieler, wenn nicht sogar der meisten FPA-Wissenschaftler:innen an interpretativen (hermeneutischen) Forschungsmethoden, die in der modernen Politikwissenschaft eher an den Rand gedrängt wurden; und zweitens auf die begrenzte Kreativität von Politikwissenschaftler:innen, die sich auf kausale Erklärungen und statistische Analysen konzentrieren, wenn es darum geht, neue und interessante FPA-Fragen und geeignete Studiendesigns zu entwickeln. Dieses Argument wird mit Beispielen aus der FPA illustriert, wie sie in zwei kürzlich erschienenen Büchern über die Außenpolitik in Österreich bzw. der Schweiz zu finden sind, sowie mit Vorschlägen zu verschiedenen Bereichen, in denen Politikwissenschaftler:innen wertvolle Erkenntnisse beisteuern könnten, die sowohl wissenschaftlich interessant als auch politisch relevant sind.

Schlüsselwörter

Analyse der Außenpolitik, Schweiz, Österreich, Methoden, Forschungsagenda

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1. Starting point: foreign policy in Switzerland, not so different from Austria

Austria and Switzerland have many socio-cultural, economic, and political similarities (Bernauer et al. 2022). For instance, both are high-income OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in the middle of Europe, cherish their status of armed neutrality, and host important parts of the United Nations system and other international organizations (e.g., the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, in Austria). They also differ in some important ways. For example, Austria is located closer to the former communist block and the new European security frontline with Russia, compared to Switzerland. It has joined the European Union whereas Switzerland has not, and it is primarily a representative democracy whereas Switzerland is a semi-direct democracy. These factors, and various others, do account for many of the similarities and differences one can observe in the foreign policies of the two countries. Two recent books on the foreign policy of Switzerland and Austria respectively provide ample evidence on such similarities and differences. When juxtaposing the main findings of the book on Austria's foreign policy, as summarized in the contribution by Martin Senn, Franz Eder, and Markus Kornprobst (2023), on the main findings on the Swiss equivalent presented in a book by Thomas Bernauer, Katja Gentinetta, and Joëlle Kuntz (2021) several commonalities stand out.

First, not surprisingly, both countries (as well as most other Western democracies) pursue very similar general goals in their foreign policy, such as security, prosperity, freedom, identity, sustainability, and a few other objectives, as stated in the respective constitution. This similarity is, for instance, also reflected in similar voting behavior of the two countries in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.¹

Second, both Austria and Switzerland are wealthy, but ultimately very small countries. This general boundary condition has strongly motivated both countries and their elites to pursue an economic strategy of openness in trade and investment, and a political strategy that combines armed neutrality and multilateralism in order to mitigate risks emanating from the more powerful countries in the international system. By and large, this approach has been very successful for both countries, though the rise of China and military action by Russia abroad over the past 15 years are now posing increasingly severe challenges to existing foreign policies – the latter had, thus far, emphasized Western cultural and political values, but economic and security equidistance between the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) on the one hand and China and Russia on the other. If anything, the war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine is likely to result in a closer alignment of Austria and Switzerland's security and defense policy with that of the United States and NATO.

Third, the expansion of foreign policy into more and more policy domains and the proliferation of organizational units for this rapid internationalization of domestic politics in public administrations has made coordination of policy positions and action increasingly demanding. Foreign ministries have lost their "monopoly" in processes of foreign policy coordination, strategy-development, decision-making, and implementation. At the level of elected policy-makers, this increasing complexity seems to have resulted in somewhat greater centralization in terms of more influence of the executive, relative to parliament, in foreign policy, though systematic empirical evidence for this claim is still rather sketchy. It also appears to stand in contrast with increased transnational political activity by political parties, civil society actors, and subnational units, e.g. cities, Bundesländer, or Cantons, which would implicate more polycentrism in foreign policy-making.

2. Differences between Austria's and Switzerland's foreign policy

One first key difference between the two countries concerns the Europeanization of foreign policy. Austria, an European Union (EU) member state, is fully integrated into the EU's processes of rule-making and implementation, for instance in trade and monetary policy, where the EU acts like a single country. It is also fully involved in the EU's joint foreign and security policy, though, unlike most other EU member states, it is not a member of NATO. Switzerland's economic policy is strongly Europeanized too – Switzerland "autonomously" enacts virtually all economic rules and regulations of the EU ex post in order to maintain access to the EU's internal market, which is vital to the country's prosperity. Its approach in other policy domains is much more ad hoc and often driven by the vagaries of domestic politics and pressure from other countries – examples include measures against tax evasion and money laundering, immigration policy, and economic sanctions against Russia in the wake of its war against Ukraine.

The combined fact that Austria's neutrality is, historically, relatively new and was imposed on the country by the Allied powers in the mid-1950s, and that Austria is strongly embedded in the Europeanization process also in the security realm, tends to make Austria's neutrality policy somewhat more pragmatic than the

¹ For data on this, see Voeten et al. 2009.

equivalent policy in Switzerland – though systematic comparison of the two countries in this respect is still lacking. This is further enhanced by Austria's history as an imperial power with large territories in eastern Europe and the Balkans until the first world war, and its location at the intersection of Western and Eastern Europe.

Switzerland's neutrality policy, in contrast, has evolved over several hundred years within a small territory that has not changed significantly since the Napoleonic wars. Neutrality is widely thought (though this is disputed amongst historians) to have spared Switzerland from the devastation of two world wars and has gone hand in hand with rapid economic growth and eventually very high average income-levels of the population. Neutrality has thus, in the eyes of the vast majority of citizens, developed from a means to an end into an end of itself that is associated with a strong sense of identity (Bernauer et al. 2021; Szvircev Tresch et al. 2022).

Another difference relates to direct democracy, which is stronger in Switzerland. Senn et al. (2023) highlight the politicization and de-politicization of foreign policy. There are no systematic comparisons across countries that could tell us whether this phenomenon is similar across Western democracies, or whether Austria is an unusual case in this respect, e.g. compared to Switzerland. For instance, it is sometimes argued that foreign policy choices in Switzerland are more volatile than in other countries, and also more politicized, because of its direct democracy. Popular examples for this include the no-vote and later on yes-vote on joining the United Nations, and the turbulent history of national votes concerning Switzerland's relation with the EU, with the population first voting no on EEA (European Economic Area) accession, but then approving two packages of bilateral EU-Swiss integration agreements. However, one could equally well argue that the specific form of the Swiss government (a broad coalition government, since the 1950, with a cabinet of seven ministers with equal rights from four parties representing around 80% of vote shares) should make changes in foreign policy more gradual, predictable, and less politicized; at least compared to systems where the party composition of the government can change drastically after each electoral cycle or at least when certain parties rise or decline, as happened with the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the pre-/post-Kreisky area in the country's foreign policy.

Yet another seeming difference, suggested by Senn et al. (2023), concerns "grand strategizing", with Austria arguably engaging in less of it than Switzerland. I tend to disagree, though more empirical research on this would be needed. It is true that the Swiss government has issued a variety of foreign policy strategy papers,

and that an ad hoc consultative body mandated by one of the seven cabinet members (the foreign minister) published a report outlining a foreign policy strategy for the coming years (Avis 2028). However, these strategy documents are, in my view, of limited coherence and, most importantly, have very limited effects on de facto foreign policy of the country. The limited de facto coherence is largely a function of the fact that the executive includes members from the political right to the political left, and choices on important changes in foreign policy are commonly subject to direct democratic voting. This tends to result in somewhat incoherent incrementalism, rather than a coherent strategy focused on longer term goals.

3. Why is FPA receiving little attention from academic political scientists?

Academic and think tank-based research on foreign policy in Austria and Switzerland (and many other countries) has focused heavily on describing decision processes and the resulting policies, frequently from a historical and legal perspective, providing normative assessments of existing foreign policies, and proposing particular policy changes. It has also focused on several more analytical issues. For instance, it has looked into the role small countries can or could play in shaping policy-making at the international level, particularly in negotiating international treaties and in decision processes in key international institutions, such as the UN General Assembly and Security Council, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and various other bodies. Nevertheless, it appears that the interest of academic political science in Austria's, Switzerland's, or also many other country's foreign policy, and foreign policy analysis as a more general field, has faded. Is this really true, and if so, why?

In a narrow, academic sense, the answer is Yes. Looking at the main general political science journals both nationally and internationally, where political scientists need to publish in order to survive and thrive in the academic market, one can find only very few articles on Austrian or Swiss foreign policy. Moreover, there is only one major academic field journal for foreign policy analysis (issued by the International Studies Association). Why then has academic interest in this issue area faded?

One might argue that this is due to the internationalization of most political science departments in universities, both in terms of the nationality of professors (increasingly foreign) and the fact that international visibility and prominence (rather than domestic relevance of research) has become most relevant to academic careers. I believe this answer is

not entirely wrong, but that the general development of academic political science is more relevant here.

Political science was established and institutionalized in Austrian and Swiss universities at a similar point in time (largely from the 1970s onwards, and thus much later than other social science disciplines like economics or psychology), but the historical and institutional context was different (Bernauer et al. 2022). Somewhat similar to Germany, political science in Austria was widely regarded as a means of education for democracy and for the public service. In Switzerland, political science started out with a stronger focus on basic research and methods of the modern social sciences. Within the past 50 years, academic political science in both countries (and most others) has converged largely on empirical-analytical modes of research (as opposed to hermeneutical methods). The former implicates a strong focus on causal hypothesis testing, often based on empirical research that relies on measuring qualitative concepts in numerical (quantitative) form and processing such information with statistical methods. Doing so requires comparison of many cases or observations. This, in turn, motivates researchers to focus on topics where causal hypotheses can be formulated, the concepts or variables in these hypotheses can be measured with numbers, and where many cases, ideally over time, can be compared in order to draw statistically significant and substantive inferences. To most political scientists, Austria's or Switzerland's foreign policy does not appear to be an attractive study subject from this viewpoint.

Take the argument that broadening the scope of foreign policy activities tends to result in more complexity, greater need for coordination, and more centralization in the hands of the federal executive as a result. Each of these theoretical constructs is very difficult to translate into a quantitatively measurable variable. And even if this were possible, meaningful statistical testing of this argument would require observations for one country over many years, or many countries at one point in time or over many years. The same holds for another question raised in both of the foreign policy books of interest here: whether small countries like Austria or Switzerland are primarily policy-downloaders or, and under what conditions, also policy-uploaders. While it seems easy to formulate a falsifiable causal hypothesis for this question (policy-downloading is more prevalent than policy-uploading the smaller a country is) it would be very difficult to test this argument by means of statistical analysis of a large number of observations, generally, or in comparison across different foreign policy areas. In the same vein, it seems very difficult to formulate and empirically test causal hypotheses on continuity and change of a country's foreign policy over time, generally, or in comparison across different issue areas. The same holds

for arguments on whether the foreign policy of a country is efficient, coherent, and effective. Though one could advance various causal arguments on variation across countries on these accounts, it seems very difficult to develop reliable and valid measures for a comparison of many countries, or a given country over a long period of time.

These challenges should not lead academic political science to completely abandon FPA. Rather, they imply that some of the very broad questions, such as those just mentioned, are perhaps better addressed by hermeneutical methods, which remain central to historical and legal research, and also dominate the two foreign policy books that motivate the discussion in this essay.

What is left for academic political science then? A lot, but this requires rethinking some of the key questions in FPA in view of formulating interesting and policy relevant causal hypotheses, and using modern social sciences methods to empirically evaluate them. The next and final section of this essay provides some suggestions.

4. Suggestions for further research

The two foreign policy books on Switzerland and Austria respectively include several questions and arguments that could lend themselves to causal hypothesizing and empirical testing. Here are several examples.

The book on Austria's foreign policy refers to dynamics of politicization and de-politicization. Based on computational text analysis of parliamentary debates and political party programs, one could, for instance, test various hypotheses about country-internal and -external drivers of such dynamics. Similar approaches could be used to test arguments on political polarization and contestation across different areas of foreign policy. Such research could be undertaken with respect to one country over time, or compare many countries over time. Moreover, drawing on the recent wave of research on political deliberation, one could try and explain variation across different political systems (e.g., presidential vs parliamentary systems, or systems with lower or higher party fragmentation in parliament) in how deliberative legislatures behave with respect to foreign policy issues on their agenda. Along the same lines, it would be interesting to learn how personality traits and party affiliation affect the propensity of members of parliament to become engaged in foreign policy issues in various forms.

Another potentially productive research area concerns public opinion and the mass media. There are competing claims on how well informed (or not) citizens are on foreign policy issues, and what role

issue- vs individual level-characteristics play in this respect. Survey and experimental approaches have experienced a boom in recent political science research, and it would seem easy to formulate and test various causal hypotheses in this area. The same applies to news media reporting. Recently developed methods for computational text analysis would allow for systematic assessment of the quality of news media reporting on foreign policy issues and potential causes of variation in this respect.

Yet another issue concerns the internationalization of public administrations. One hypothesis worth testing is whether, all else equal, countries that score higher on measures of economic openness or political globalization (e.g., based on the KOF Globalization Index²) maintain larger and more diversified embassies abroad and send more staff members to international meetings.

Another opportunity for research concerns the implications of political system characteristics and actor constellations for participation in international collaborative efforts. Drivers such as party composition of coalition governments, involvement of civil society in national delegations to international bargaining and institutions, and other factors could be interesting to study in this regard. Methodologically, such research could draw on existing work that uses statistical models to explain the effects of country and treaty characteristics on the propensity of countries to join international agreements.

It would also be very interesting to learn more about the presumed proliferation of bottom-up participation in foreign policy processes, for instance participation by civil society actors in meetings and conferences in the context of international organizations and treaties, or transnational policy coordination and agreements between subnational units in border areas. Many of these phenomena can be quantitatively measured and compared as function of political system characteristics and other driving forces.

Finally, even rather amorphous phenomena like national role conceptions in foreign policy could be studied based on modern social sciences methods for hypothesis testing. One could, for instance, use computer-assisted text analysis of annual speeches of heads of state or government in the UN General Assembly to this end. Comparing many countries in such analysis would also help us understand whether, for instance, such role conceptions remain stable over time, and what causes changes therein.

To conclude, these examples suggest that currently weak interest amongst academic political scientists in studying the foreign policy of their own or other countries can be overcome. It simply requires the political science community to think and work hard on identifying interesting and measurable phenomena, develop innovative arguments on what drives variation in particular outcomes of interest, and then use the full methodological arsenal of the modern social sciences to empirically test such arguments.

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2 The KOF Globalisation Index is “a composite index measuring globalization for every country in the world along the economic, social and political dimension” (Gygli et al. 2019, 543); see <https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html>.