The Cult of the Relevant: International Relations Scholars and Policy Engagement Beyond the Ivory Tower

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Over the past fifteen years, a narrative has developed that IR scholars have become a "cult of the irrelevant," with declining influence on and engagement with policy debates. Despite these assertions, the evidence for limited policy engagement has been anecdotal. We investigate the extent of policy engagement—the ways in which IR scholars participate in policy-making processes and/or attempt to shape those processes—by surveying IR scholars directly about their engagement activities. We find policy engagement is pervasive among IR scholars. We draw on theories of credit-claiming to motivate expectations about how and when scholars are likely to engage with practitioners. Consistent with our expectations, much of this engagement comes in forms that involve small time commitments and provide opportunities for credit-claiming, such as media appearances and short-form, bylined op-eds and blog posts. However, sizable minorities report engaging in consulting activities not for attribution/publication and writing policy briefs, and a majority of respondents indicate they engaged in these activities several times a year or more. We find only small differences in engagement across gender and rank. Our results demonstrate that, for IR scholars, some form of policy engagement is the norm.

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Over the past fifteen years there has been significant interest in the relationship between the academic and policy communities of international relations (IR), with many bemoaning the increasing irrelevance of political science, and IR scholarship in particular, for policy makers. According to Joseph Nye (2009), IR scholars are "on the sidelines," failing to live up to their "obligation to help improve on policy ideas when they can." *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2014) lamented that his "onetime love, political science … seems to be trying, in terms of practical impact, to commit suicide." Stephen Van Evera (2015) argued that traditional academic disciplines and incentives promote a "cult of the irrelevant," an arcane professional community that values technique and internal dialogue over social relevance. Research by Paul Avey and Michael Desch (Avey and Desch 2014; Avey and Desch 2020; Desch 2015; Desch 2019) supports claims of a growing academic–policy divide, attributing it to institutional structures and incentives on the academic side that privilege quantitative over qualitative methods.

Yet these critiques come at a time when there seems to be more engagement than ever before. There are several "bridging the gap" initiatives designed specifically to help IR scholars connect their research to policy problems and grants and fellowships that create opportunities for IR scholars to engage directly in the policy process.[1] This is in

addition to the proliferation of online outlets, like *The Monkey Cage*, *Lawfare*, *War on the Rocks*, *Duck of Minerva*, and *Political Violence at a Glance*, that feature short-form pieces by IR and security scholars written for a wide audience (Weaver 2017). For academics like Marc Lynch (2016) and Erik Voeten (2014), we are in fact living in a "golden age of policy engagement."

In this article, we assess how frequently and via which activities IR scholars attempt to bridge the gap between the academic and policy worlds. Because *policy relevance* is a difficult concept to measure and one that may not be the most informative gauge of policy influence or impact, we expand our inquiry to *policy engagement* and assess how widely and frequently IR scholars engage with policy audiences.[2] Exploring the range and the rate of policy engagement across this spectrum—"the ways in which academics participate in policy-making processes and/or attempt to shape those processes" (Maliniak et al. 2020, 11)—is therefore key to understanding the ways in which academics are (and can be) relevant to policy makers and policy implementers. Understanding what prevents IR scholars from engaging in these different activities is also crucial to incentivizing engagement, for those interested in doing so.

To address these issues, we fielded a survey in fall 2019 to explore the breadth and depth of the academic–policy relationship within the IR professoriate in the United States. The results of the survey from 971 IR scholars reveal that claims of growing irrelevance notwithstanding, there is a high level of policy engagement by IR scholars—albeit much of which occurs on scholars' terms and via activities that dovetail nicely with academic career incentives.

We theorize that most scholars will engage via modes that require relatively modest investments of time and provide opportunities for credit-claiming that have currency in academic circles. Consistent with our expectations, the majority of their engagements come in the form of blog posts or op-eds, where the ability to credit-claim is high, and costs (i.e., time investments) are low. Nevertheless, a significant portion of scholars write more substantive policy reports and take consulting opportunities with policy-oriented organizations despite fewer opportunities for claiming credit in public and the opportunity costs associated with these activities.

We also address the issue of professional incentives to engage with practitioners and the policy process. A large majority of scholars (70%) see professional benefit in policy engagement. However, a majority of scholars do not believe their primary employers—universities and colleges—reward these activities in tenure and promotion decisions. These beliefs are consistent with those of department chairs at top-50 departments and deans of policy-focused professional schools of public and international affairs. Both groups prize peer-reviewed publications, with policy-school deans "wanting it all": high-level scholarship

and engagement, even if their hiring, tenure, and promotion practices value the former far more than the latter (Desch et al. 2022). If anything, the puzzle might shift from "why aren't IR scholars engaging the policy world" to "why are so many IR scholars engaging despite few professional incentives to do so?"

We also explore conjectures related to engagement activities across methodological approaches, ranks, and genders. We find little difference in rates and frequencies of policy engagement between quantitative and qualitative scholars, despite a much-discussed divide between these two groups marked by the belief that qualitative scholars are more likely to engage with the policy process than their quantitative colleagues. We find a difference, however, in how these two groups of scholars view policy engagement. Self-identified quantitative scholars are less likely than their qualitative counterparts to believe policy engagement *should* be a standard part of academic employment, and almost one third think policy engagement should not be valued in tenure and promotion processes. We see significant differences in rates of frequent engagement between tenured and tenure-track faculty at research-intensive (R1) institutions. At the same time, we find no appreciable gap in engagement at non-R1 institutions, a diverse category that includes more teaching-oriented liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensive universities, and large universities where research output is not a primary goal.

Finally, we investigate IR scholars' perceptions of and attitudes toward policy engagement, both regarding whether academics bear responsibility for the consequences of their engagement and whether engagement creates incentives for academics to temper their true beliefs to appeal to policy communities. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that scholars have responsibility for the effects of their engagement in the real world. Moreover, while very few respondents self-identified as having tempered or withheld their true beliefs when engaging with the policy community, a plurality expressed concern that colleagues do this, a mismatch that is worth further investigation.

By switching the focus from policy relevance to engagement, we gain a richer and more comprehensive view of the variety of activities underway. Overall, we find little evidence to support the claim that IR scholars are disengaged from policy-oriented engagement activities. Coupled with recent findings that a majority of surveyed US national security, trade, and development officials engage with scholarly ideas and seek out scholarly expertise when formulating policy (Avey et al. 2022), the theory–practice gap is being bridged more than is commonly thought.

Policy Relevance versus Engagement

Concerns about a growing policy–academic divide have tended to focus on the issue of declining policy relevance,

although the concept itself is rarely defined. For Kristof (2014) relevance is about "matter[ing] in today's great debates." For Van Evera (2015), it means "addressing the problems of the real world" and answering problem-driven, important questions. For Nye (2009), similarly, the key to policy relevance is the relationship to the real world, but this relationship presumably can take a number of different forms and would not require that scholarship make explicit policy recommendations (Desch 2019). Avey and Desch (2020; also Desch 2015) employ this definition to argue that the declining frequency of policy prescriptions within top IR journals demonstrates the increasing irrelevance of IR, and security studies in particular, to policy makers.

But explicit policy recommendations are neither necessary nor sufficient for academic work to inform policy debates. The CIA funds the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), and its analyses are used by the agency in their stability assessments and planning. These modeling exercises do not make policy recommendations, yet result from specific requests by the intelligence community (e.g., Goldstone et al. 2010; Ward and Beger 2017), even if the PITF's forecasting efforts are not universally viewed as helpful within that community (Desch 2019). As Maliniak et al. (2020) put it, a definition of policy relevance revolving around specific policy prescriptions in published articles "narrows the conceptual aperture too much."

We assess policy engagement on the basis of engagement-related activities rather than making policy prescriptions per se. As Horowitz (2015) and Maliniak et al. (2020) argue, policy relevance can take many forms and flow from many different types of scholar–policy engagements; some scholarship may be "policy actionable," but much will not. Scholarship without actionable recommendations can offer insights, reframe problems for policy makers, spark public debate, guide policy implementation, and set long-term agendas.

Policy relevance and "impact"—whether academic work or outreach shaped a policy decision or outcome—also are difficult to observe and quantify. Policy-making processes are often opaque, and scholars may never know whether or how their work or engagement shaped outcomes (Devermont and Erdberg Steadman 2021). Avey and Desch (2014) and Avey et al. (2022) offer a partial solution to the problem of assessing impact by surveying policy makers—specifically US policy makers in the executive branch—directly about their use of and engagement with academic arguments and evidence in their roles.

This approach has significant merits. It narrows the range of actors considered policy-consequential, however, excluding not just the legislative and judicial branches of the US federal government but also US state governments, other national governments, NGOs, firms, and civil society organizations. Moreover, it focuses on specific scholarly outputs: blog posts, books, social media commentary, op-ed or news articles, policy briefs, think tank reports, etc. (Avey et al. 2022, 9). This categorization would not include scholars' direct roles in policy organizations, communication, briefings, inputs for reports not resulting in attribution, and other means by which their expertise might be brought to bear without being tied to specific outputs.

For these reasons, we focus on policy engagement. Engagement is necessary (but not sufficient) for most of the types of policy relevance outlined here. Some types of engagement will generate policy-relevant knowledge in different ways for different policy audiences, and some types of engagement may have more direct impact than others. Yet, understanding the range of different types of engagement, the frequency with which these activities are undertaken, and the barriers or incentives to undertaking them is a key step toward building a comprehensive understanding of the academic–policy relationship. It is key also to establishing the extent of academic engagement and outreach in ways funding organizations and the academy increasingly and explicitly encourage scholars to do. This focus on engagement also broadens the aperture to encompass scholars' involvement with other organizations that play roles in governance, like think tanks, civil society organizations, interest groups, and the private sector (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010).

Policy Engagement: What Would We Expect?

How might we expect IR scholars to engage with the policy community based on our understanding of disciplinary incentives? Below, we outline several hypotheses that we evaluate using data from an original survey of IR scholars.

First, given the range of different policy activities available to scholars, how might we expect them to engage? Will they choose to publish op-eds or blog posts? Will they seek out highly visible policy jobs? Or, will they prefer lower-profile routes like informal not-for-attribution consultations? In answering this question, we assume most scholars are "success-seeking" in the academy. We can think of success narrowly in terms of promotion and tenure, or more broadly in terms of the scholar's standing within the profession (Goldman 2006). Regardless, we anticipate scholars will choose activities that improve their chances of achieving such success. This assumption is identical to that made by those who herald the declining relevance of IR research. We differ, however, in that we relax two other implicit assumptions present in past work on these questions. First, we allow that scholars can gain standing through outputs and service outside the academy and traditional academic publishing, though the degree to which this is true depends on the form of engagement. Second, we allow that pressure to produce scholarship to improve one's disciplinary standing will vary over one's career with, on average, early career scholars feeling greater

pressure than later career scholars. This assumption generates different expectations, which are largely confirmed, about scholars' behavior.

As Hendrix (2016) notes, standing within the academic profession is a key metric of success for most academics. To gain standing, scholars generally produce research and seek to publish it in highly regarded journals or university book presses, teach and mentor PhD students (as applicable), and engage in service, with these activities in descending order of their importance. If all goes well, research will generate citations from other, preferably highly-regarded, scholars. Scholars also may seek outside funding or teaching and research awards, or they may provide service to their universities, disciplinary journals, and associations. Excellence in teaching and service are harder for other members of the discipline to observe, however, so success-seeking scholars will try to amass a public record of their impact, and their peers will have shared beliefs about the profile a scholar of a given standing ought to have. There is, thus, a premium on the ability to claim credit for one's activities and have engagement be visible to other academics and the university administrators who make decisions about tenure and promotion. As the aphorism holds, "deans can't read but they can count." Policy engagement that produces lines on the CV will be preferable to that which does not.

All scholars may be motivated to gain standing, but they also face significant time constraints in the form of tenure and/or promotion clocks. The tenure and promotion guidelines prevailing at major research universities inform the research elements of similar requirements at more teaching-oriented institutions. These policies revolve around scholarly output in the form of peer-reviewed books and articles with a premium placed on publications in high-visibility, high-impact outlets. Scholars face opportunity costs for policy engagement that takes valuable time away from producing more traditional scholarly outputs or marketing one's activities within the academy through conference presentations, service to professional associations, invited talks, and participation in workshops.

Combining these two concepts, credit-claiming opportunities and time commitment, leads to a 2 × 2 typology of types of policy engagement (see table 1).

We expect policy engagement that increases opportunities for credit-claiming while limiting time expenditure will be the most popular activity among those who engage. This engagement will take the form of op-eds in newspapers and outlets like *Lawfare, The Monkey Cage*, and *War on the Rocks*, as well as media interviews. This conjecture is consistent with Stephen Walt's (2016) recommendations regarding policy engagement for early career scholars:

> … [B]e smart: if your research has practical implications that the public would benefit from, by all means write an op-ed or a blog post or some other form of public outreach. But don't let the desire for fame or public impact get in the way of your scholarly output; you'll have decades to become a public intellectual after you've been promoted (and the university may even appreciate it then).

Moreover, as academics themselves are among the readership of these outlets, exposure in them has the added benefit of increasing awareness of the scholar's work within the very academic community in which they seek to establish standing. In contrast, taking formal policy positions in government or civil society or performing consulting activities requiring large time commitments and/or the inability to claim credit, such as providing uncredited inputs to policy documents, should be the least popular forms of policy engagement. These activities take time away from scholarly endeavors and do not provide obvious opportunities to claim credit. Universities may not grant leaves to facilitate this type of engagement, and the increasing prevalence of dual-career (both academic and nonacademic) households places additional constraints on the ability of academics to take policy positions that require extended relocations (Wilson 1999).

This logic generates the following hypothesis:

H1: IR scholars should be most engaged in activities that provide opportunities for credit-claiming and which require relatively small investments of time.

Second, who is engaging? A central claim of the "cult of the irrelevant" school is that the quantification and the formalization of IR has resulted in a decline in policy relevance, especially in security studies (Avey and Desch 2014; Desch 2015). This supposed decline is due to both supply-side and demand-side dynamics. On the supply

Table 1
A Typology of Policy Engagement Activities

		Time commitment	
		High	Low
Opportunity to credit-claim	High	Attributed policy briefs or reports	Op-eds and media engagement, blog posts
	Low	Not-for-credit reports, consulting activities not resulting in attribution, full-time/part-time policy positions	Media engagement not resulting in attribution, conducting reviews of policy reports

side, formal and quantitative researchers, it is argued, are more interested in narrow disciplinary questions that are amenable to "simplistic hypothesis testing" but make "scholarship less useful to policymakers and concerned citizens" (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). Desch (2015) argues similarly that professional incentives within the academy have led to "technique trump[ing] relevance," though more recent work by Desch and coauthors finds policy makers do not regard quantitative methodologies as an impediment to scholarship informing their practice (Avey et al. 2022). If quantification and formalization of IR scholarship is as antithetical to policy engagement as these arguments contend, we should expect the following:

H2: Quantitative/formal IR scholars should engage at (much) lower rates than their qualitatively oriented colleagues.

Following this logic, quantitative/formal IR scholars should be less likely to perceive policy engagement as a standard part of academic employment to be considered in tenure and promotion reviews. Given Avey and Desch's (2014) findings, these tendencies should be particularly pronounced among security scholars, who are skeptical about the quantification and formalization of IR scholarship irrespective of its interest or utility to policy audiences (Desch 2019).

How might the university system, particularly research expectations associated with tenure and promotion processes, impact policy engagement? Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney (2019) find that publications generally considered to be policy-relevant, like policy briefs and reports or op-eds and blogs, are assigned less weight in academic tenure decisions than peer-reviewed publications. This finding resonates with calls from many senior scholars (e.g., Walt 2016) for junior academics to delay engagement, focus on peer-reviewed publications, and wait until tenure to engage in policy work. Given these professional incentives, we expect untenured scholars to focus more on traditional research publications over policy engagement. This should be particularly pronounced at research universities, where higher numbers of peer-reviewed publications are expected:

H3: Junior (untenured) IR scholars should engage at lower rates than tenured colleagues, and at much lower rates than their tenured colleagues at R1 institutions.

Maliniak, Powers, and Walter (2013) show that IR articles authored by women are less frequently cited and less central in the literature than similarly situated works authored by men or teams of men and women. Additionally, Hancock, Baum, and Breuning (2013) show that female academics are underrepresented in peer-reviewed publications and are failing to earn tenure in proportion to the number of political science PhDs earned per year.

Other work shows that the burdens of departmental and disciplinary service fall more heavily on women than men, and that women face higher demands on their time from students but are penalized in teaching evaluations (Butcher and Kersey 2015; Martin 2016). Parental leave, often taken early in women's careers, also increases pressure on tenure clocks (Maliniak, Powers, and Walter 2013). These results suggest that women face higher opportunity costs than men when it comes to policy engagement.

When it comes to policy engagement, furthermore, disparities in recognition for scholarly outputs may be replicated. Women may be in a double recognition bind: they must work harder than their male colleagues to secure recognition for more traditional academic outputs but are likely to be rewarded relatively less for the fruits of policy engagement work. Taken together, gender disparities in the opportunity costs of engagement and the ability to claim credit lead us to anticipate that:

H4: Female IR scholars, especially junior (untenured) women, should engage at lower rates than male colleagues at the same stage of their careers.

The previous conjectures relate to how scholars may engage. Now, we turn to the question of how IR scholars view the ethics of policy engagement. Do scholars believe that engagement entails some responsibility for the policy outcomes that may arise from their suggestions, proposals, or recommendations? Now more than ever, government funding agencies—including the state legislatures that control public universities' finances—call for academics in both the social and natural sciences to demonstrate the real-world relevance of their research. Examples include the National Science Foundation's increasing emphasis on broader impacts and the Impact Agenda of the UK's Research Excellence Framework. Early career academics increasingly are told to produce high-quality scholarship and scholarship that is useful to society in practical terms.

But this engagement is not without jeopardy. Even seemingly benevolent policy engagement can entail ethical dilemmas and yield unintended consequences. Research findings may simply be wrong, charting an incorrect course for policy makers; conflicts of interest may arise; both academics and policy makers bring known and unknown biases to the enterprise; and research findings may encourage some policy actors (such as activists) to put themselves at risk (Hendrix 2019). Policy engagement also can erode academics' intellectual property rights, lead to exploitation or harm by powerful institutions, and/or undermine scholarly integrity and independence (Blagden 2019).

Perhaps the most potentially corrosive outcome regards the effects of engagement on academic integrity. Adam Elkus (2015) worries that preoccupation with policy relevance leads scholars to shape their beliefs and cater to

the "whims of elite governmental policymakers." We have focused on the costs of policy engagement for scholars, but there is little doubt it can confer benefits. In addition to intrinsic benefits, engagement may generate greater media coverage and visibility, access to amorphous "insider" status in powerful organizations, and pecuniary incentives related to consulting activities. To the extent these benefits are desirable, scholars may face pressure to shape their analysis and conclusions to conform to policy makers' stated or unstated desires.

For this reason, some scholars may find policy engagement ethically dubious. They may heed Weber's admonition that the proper role of scientists is to seek knowledge and understand causal relations but not to use said knowledge to claim political or ethical authority as a basis for intervening in policy formation, especially as doing so can compromise their commitments to science as a vocation (1946).[3] The roles of scientist and policy maker are both to be valued but to be kept largely separate (Tholen 2021).

Given the role Weber's thoughts have played in the development of the social sciences, IR scholars may believe that those who engage with policy makers are sacrificing academic integrity by distorting their views to appeal to policy audiences. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H5: IR scholars worry that policy engagement encourages scholars to distort their views and opinions to appeal to policy audiences.

Methodology

To investigate our conjectures, we surveyed IR scholars about their policy engagement activities. In fielding the survey, we attempted to contact all IR scholars in the United States via email (Hendrix et al. 2023). We define IR scholars as individuals who are employed at a college or university in a political science department or professional school and who teach or conduct research on issues that cross international borders. The survey was open from October to December 2019. Of the 5,251 scholars across the United States contacted, 971 responded to at least one question, for a response rate of approximately 18%.[4] In addition to gathering contact information for these individuals, we also code their apparent gender, their rank, and the type of university at which they are employed (we use the *US News and World Report* categories: National Research University, Regional Research University, National Liberal Arts College, and Regional Liberal Arts College). Our respondents are roughly similar to the broader IR scholar population in academic rank and the type of academic institution at which respondents work, although it includes a higher percentage of men and a higher percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty than the overall scholar population (see the full details in the appendix).

Despite these similarities, one might still be concerned about self-selection effects: individuals interested in policy engagement may be more likely to respond to our survey than those less interested, which would bias our estimates of engagement upward. To assess this possibility, we need some measure of the latent trait of "taste for policy engagement" that can be obtained for both respondents and nonrespondents to our survey. As a proxy we code all individuals in our population for whether they have published blog posts on *The Monkey Cage* since it moved to the *Washington Post* in 2013.[5] This allows us to generate a measure of the incidence rate of one form of policy engagement in both the population of all IR scholars in the United States and the subset of those scholars who responded to our survey. We rely on *The Monkey Cage* because it is a publicly observable and costly—but not too costly, according to our argument—signal of one's interest in or taste for policy engagement and because it has a record of publishing work from scholars across a diverse set of institutions.

We find that 12% of US scholars have published in *The Monkey Cage* since 2013, 9 percentage points lower than among our respondents (about 21%), suggesting that those with a taste for engagement were more likely to respond to our survey. To account for this, we generate poststratification weights (DeBell and Krosnick [2009], implemented for R by Pasek et al. [2018]). These weights correct for differences in the distribution of gender, rank, and *Monkey Cage* activity between our respondents and the broader population of IR scholars. In addition, we subsample by whether respondents have published in *The Monkey Cage*. In the first set of analyses below, we report both weighted and unweighted estimates. As will be seen, our conclusions are similar whether or not we apply weights to the data. As such, we report results from our unweighted analyses for the remainder of the paper. Weighted versions of all analyses appear in the appendix.

Findings

Do Scholars Engage?

We find evidence of pervasive policy engagement by IR scholars. A sizable majority—about 70% in both the weighted and unweighted data—of respondents worked either for or with policy-consequential organizations at some point in their careers. We break these results out by organization type in table 2 where we present the raw data, the weighted data, and results based on the subsample of those who have published in *The Monkey Cage*. In each of these, we find that the most common type of engagement was with the US government followed by engagement with nongovernmental organizations and think tanks (though the order varies somewhat between *The Monkey Cage* authors and the broader sample). Still our unweighted results do not differ appreciably from the weighted sample or the subsample of *The Monkey Cage* respondents.

Table 2
Which of the Following Types of Policy Organizations Have You Worked with/for?

Response option	Unweighted sample (pct.)	Weighted sample (pct.)	Sub-sample of Monkey Cage authors (pct.)
US government (including military service)	37.1%	38.5%	38.7%
None	30%	29.3%	25.3%
NGO	23.7%	24.5%	22.7%
Think tank	23.3%	22.7%	32.5%
International organization	13.2%	12.8%	16.5%
Private sector	12.7%	12.4%	14.4%
Foreign government (including military service)	9%	9.1%	8.2%
Interest group	7.5%	7.7%	7.2%
N	926	925	194

Note: percentages do not sum to 100%, because engagement with multiple types of organizations is possible.

Smaller shares worked for or with international organizations and the private sector, foreign governments, and interest groups. For many academics, their engagement spanned organizational types: roughly a third (32.2%) reported engaging with multiple organizational types, and about 14% worked for or with three or more different organizational types.

Nearly half (47.7%) of survey respondents worked in the policy world before entering academia. And these positions were not just short-term summer internships: 37.7% of this group held positions for six months or more. Indeed, for most respondents, some type of engagement during their scholarly career is a relatively frequent activity. When asked how frequently they engaged in these activities over the past five years, a majority (58.3%) said at least several times a year; 15.7% said they engaged monthly.

When IR scholars engage, what types of activities do they engage in? As expected (H1), the most frequent modalities were those that provide opportunities for credit-claiming while requiring smaller investments of time: media appearances or interviews (68.7%) and op-ed/blog-writing (63.0%). Whether blog-writing in general constitutes engagement, however, is questioned by Avey et al. (2021), who find that while *Foreign Policy*-affiliated blogs, *War on the Rocks*, and *The Monkey Cage* are consulted by policy makers at reasonably high rates, other blogs like *Duck of Minerva* and *Political Violence at a Glance* are not. There may still be professional reasons for scholars to write for these outlets, but policy engagement—at least as recognized by policy makers themselves—does not appear to be foremost among them.

"Deeper" engagement modalities, such as holding a full-time position in a government agency, multilateral organization, advocacy organization, think tank, or interning for some, were much less frequent (19.0% and 11.6%, respectively). This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that IR scholars favor those types of activities that

require smaller time commitments and can amplify or enhance their scholarly work, rather than force tradeoffs by occupying more of scholars' time and energy but resulting in fewer observable outputs (Hendrix 2016).

Nevertheless, sizable minorities (48.8% and 40.5% respectively) reported that they engage in consulting activities not for attribution/publication and writing policy briefs for government agencies, advocacy organizations, or think tanks. In terms of time commitments, consulting activities are hard to parse, as they might range from commitments of a couple of hours (focus-group participation, Chatham House rules-based discussions) to significant time investments (commissioned reports or studies for private audiences). There are at least two possible explanations for this relatively high rate of engagement in consulting. First, compared to other forms of engagement, the financial benefits of consulting jobs can be enticing. Financial compensation therefore may be an important variable in explaining policy engagement rates when public credit-claiming is not possible. Second, many IR scholars view policy engagement as valuable—both for society and their own professional benefit. In total, 70% of respondents believe that policy engagement enhances the quality of their teaching and research.

Our third hypothesis asks, do junior scholars engage less? Seniority appears to result in more frequent engagement in a roughly linear fashion. Of chaired professors, 74% reported engaging either monthly or several times a year over the previous five years, with full professors (59%), associate professors (57%), and assistant professors (52%) engaging less frequently. Assistant professors engage the least frequently of those on the tenure track, but the majority still choose to do so at least several times a year. These aggregate findings are driven by differential rates of junior engagement between those working at research-oriented R1 institutions and those at other types of institutions. As table 3 demonstrates, junior scholars at

least several times a year, a share similar that of qualitative scholars (57.2%; the difference between the two is not statistically significant).

There is some difference of opinion across the qualitative–quantitative divide about whether policy engagement is a standard part of academic employment and whether it should be valued in tenure and promotion decisions. Qualitative scholars agree somewhat more with both propositions (tables 5 and 6), though the margins are not large and not wider among the subset of scholars who identify primarily as international/global security scholars. A majority of both qualitative and quantitative researchers (66.1% and 55%) agreed that their universities should value policy engagement in tenure and promotion decisions. Among security scholars, the gap across the methodological divide was even smaller (63.8% and 57.1%).

What emerges is not a large quantitative–qualitative divide among security scholars, but a more bimodal distribution of preferences among quantitative security scholars. In both tables 5 and 6, quantitative security scholars were less likely to sit on the fence; whereas roughly a quarter of qualitative security scholars neither agreed nor disagreed that their university should value policy engagement in tenure and promotion decisions, only one in nine quantitative scholars neither agreed nor disagreed.

The evidence indicates that some form of relatively frequent policy engagement is the norm, rather than the exception, among IR scholars. A puzzle emerges from the fact that, by and large, IR scholars do not believe that these activities are recognized by universities, their primary employers. Yet, they still engage in such activities relatively frequently. Only 31% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed their university *currently* values policy engagement in the tenure and promotion process, with 44% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This stands in stark contrast to beliefs about whether these activities should count in promotion decisions: 63% agreed or strongly agreed their university *should* value policy engagement in the tenure and promotion process, with only 16% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. IR scholars are clearly engaging frequently, but they do not believe that there are direct

R1s engage less frequently than their senior colleagues, while junior scholars at other types of institutions engage at similar rates to their tenured colleagues.

We find little evidence for a substantial gender gap in scholarly engagement. Higher rates of female IR scholars (63.4%) report engaging at least several times a year than their male counterparts (56.5%), although men engage monthly at slightly higher rates (16.4% vs. 13.8%).[6] The gap in monthly engagement may be partially attributable to the gender gap among chaired professors, who account for 12.6% of male respondents but only 8.9% of female respondents; indeed, the gender gap in chaired professorships (79.6% male vs. 20.4% female) is larger than for any other academic rank. The difference between male and female rates of engagement was not statistically significant, however, either across ranks (Pearson $chi^2(3)$=2.51, $Pr = 0.455$) or at the junior/untenured level (Pearson $chi^2(1)$ =.354, $Pr = 0.552$). The data are thus inconsistent with our expectations regarding H4.

Is there a quantitative–qualitative divide in engagement practice and perception? The evidence is mixed. Regarding frequency of engagement, we do not see a large gap between qualitative and quantitative IR scholars overall (table 4). There is a more pronounced gap across methodological lines, however, both among frequent engagers (those engaging monthly) and those who self-identify as international/global security experts. Qualitative security scholars engage monthly at over twice the rate of quantitative security scholars. Still, over half (54.7%) of quantitative security scholars engage in policy-related activities at

Table 4
In the Past Five Years, How Frequently Have You Engaged in the Policy-Related Activities that You Identified Above?

	All scholars		International/global security	
Engagement freq.	**Quantitative**	**Qualitative**	**Quantitative**	**Qualitative**
Monthly	12.6%	15.4%	7.5%	17.6%
Several times a year	44.2%	44%	47.2%	39.6%
Once every few years	35.4%	32.8%	41.5%	37.4%
Never	7.8%	7.8%	3.8%	5.5%
N	206	357	53	91

Table 5
Policy Engagement Should Be a Standard Part of Academic Employment, Like Research, Teaching, and Service

Engagement freq.	All scholars		International/global security	
	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
Agree	33.5%	38.9%	33.9%	40.4%
Disagree	37.8%	27.4%	44.6%	26.6%
Neither	28.7%	33.7%	21.4%	33%
N	209	365	56	94

Table 6
My University Should Value Policy Engagement in the Tenure and Promotion Process

Engagement freq.	All scholars		International/global security	
	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
Agree	55%	66.1%	57.1%	63.8%
Disagree	22%	12.9%	30.4%	12.8%
Neither	23%	20.9%	12.5%	23.4%
N	209	363	56	94

professional rewards for doing so. In some instances, such as private consulting, the tangible benefits may come in the form of additional income, but many of the engagement modalities involve no direct monetary compensation.

There are several possible interpretations of this apparent paradox. First, many forms of scholarly engagement affect evaluations of scholars by their respective academic communities: a *Foreign Affairs* article may be intended for a primarily nonacademic audience, but it may have cachet among academic audiences as well. Second, monetary and nonmonetary benefits compensate for the lost time that otherwise could have been dedicated to research and writing for the academic audience. And third, many academics may engage simply because they value it *eo ipso.*

Does Engagement Entail Responsibility?

Do IR scholars bear partial responsibility for the outcomes associated with their engagement, and does this engagement encourage scholars to distort their opinions to cater to policy audiences?

IR scholars believe policy engagement comes with some responsibility for real-world outcomes. An overwhelming majority (87.1%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "In the event that their policy recommendations come to be adopted by policy makers, scholars bear at least partial responsibility for the impact of those policies in the real world." At least among IR scholars, the idea that their responsibility ends with communication of their perspective is widely rejected. Given the emphasis on creating opportunities to engage and coaching on the mechanics of engagement, the fact that ethical considerations have not been centered historically in graduate/early career scholar training is striking.

IR scholars disagree on the question of whether policy engagement might lead scholars to distort their own views and opinions to appeal to policy audiences. Policy engagement—especially high-profile, public-facing engagement like media appearances, delivering Congressional testimony, or writing for popular media—can give scholars attention and a platform that their academic work would never provide. Even behind-the-scenes engagement, like consulting and not-for-attribution briefings, can provide academics with access to high-level officials, to say nothing of direct financial compensation. Given these potential benefits, might IR scholars bend their analysis to conform with the perceived expectations of these audiences?

We asked IR scholars how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I worry that policy-engaged scholars distort their true beliefs or opinions to appeal to policy audiences." More than a third (36.4%) agreed, while 29.4% disagreed, and 34.3% neither agreed nor disagreed (figure 1). Interestingly, very few IR scholars (4.7%) self-identified as having tempered or withheld their true beliefs or opinions in anticipation that the sponsor of those activities might disapprove. IR scholars report that they have not been tempted to tell funders or organizations they consult with what they want to hear, but a plurality worry that their colleagues have. This creates a potential dynamic in which scholars, even policy-engaged ones, are suspicious of the ways others' policy engagement shapes their incentives and whether they communicate their views honestly, raising issues of academic integrity.

Figure 1
Respondents' Concerns about Engagement Distorting Scholarly Perspective
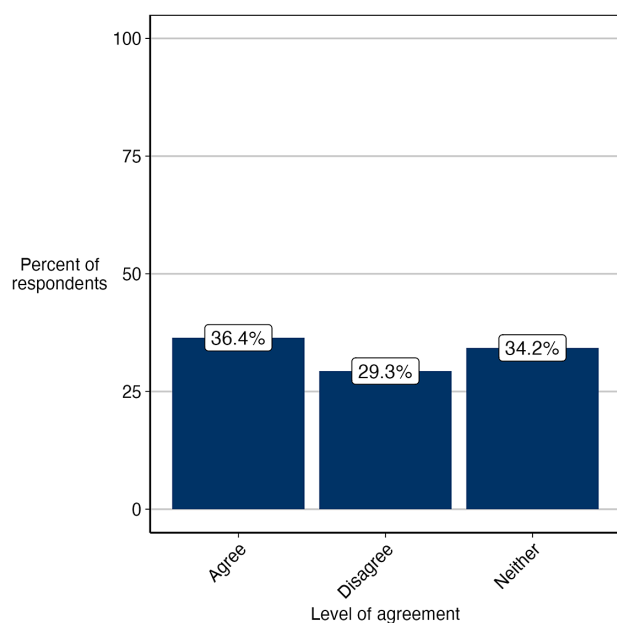
We also asked whether IR scholars tended to express their own views or give deference to scholarly consensus when engaging in policy discussions. This is important, since Pielke (2007) notes that one of the more common roles that experts play for policy makers is as "science arbiter," with the expert (or group of experts) supporting decision makers by providing answers to questions that can be addressed empirically: Are foreign-imposed regimes likely to endure? Will climate change increase armed conflict? Under what conditions does foreign aid reduce poverty? At what level is government debt fundamentally unsustainable? The presumption is that scientific experts can provide objective answers to these questions. The answers to these questions are often complex and contextual, however, and the evidence is often ambiguous and subject to ongoing debate (Jassanoff 1998). And, of course, scholars typically have their own views on these questions, and their views may or may not represent consensus positions.

Do IR scholars privilege their own views in their interactions with policy audiences, or do they seek to convey expert consensus positions? IR scholars were again divided, with 36% agreeing that they valued their own conclusions over scholarly consensus, 29.4% disagreeing, and 34.5% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Seniority clearly mattered, with each rung up the academic ladder conferring greater confidence in one's own findings. Nearly half of chaired professors agreed that they valued their own findings over scholarly consensus, while only 28.6% of assistant professors did (table 7). Given that policy makers tend to value scholarly consensus as a basis for informing policy decisions[7] (Avey et al. 2022), this finding is troubling: the most senior (and thus academically qualified, as signaled by rank) voices in the room may be the least likely to use their expertise to advocate for consensus positions on subjects.

Conclusion

Given the myriad problems facing the world, it is perhaps encouraging to know IR scholars are engaging widely with the policy community. The results of our survey demonstrate the value of analyzing not just "relevance" but also different types and modes of policy engagement. Doing so provides a richer picture of the range of activities that scholars engage in, as well as the incentives and barriers to engaging in these activities. However, our analysis is not able to assess the question of whether these diverse efforts amount to "impact," which itself is an amorphous concept. That question may be best answered by analyzing practitioners' perceptions of the adoption of scholarly inputs (Avey et al. 2022).

As expected, though scholars are engaging relatively frequently, and many have substantive policy experience, much of this engagement is in the "quick win" category— engagement that is relatively low on the effort scale and high on the credit-claiming scale. And some of that engagement may be "engagement in name only": all blog-writing is not created equal.

This engagement is valuable in translating dense scholarship into easily digestible formats, but a substantial

Table 7
Academic Rank and Valuing One's Own Conclusions over Scholarly Consensus

Rank	Agree	Disagree	Neither
Chaired professor	47.4% (45)	21.1% (20)	31.6% (30)
Full professor	40.3% (106)	24% (63)	35.7% (94)
Associate professor	32% (89)	37.4% (104)	30.6% (85)
Assistant professor	28.6% (30)	33.3% (35)	38.1% (40)
Other	34.8% (32)	30.4% (28)	34.8% (32)

proportion of IR scholars (almost 40%) engage more deeply in not-for-attribution briefings and publications and published policy briefs. This is a greater percentage than we might expect given the time pressures many scholars face. This finding may be explained by the fact that the vast majority of IR scholars see value in policy engagement for their own professional development, but it may also be an expression of scholars' values.

Much has been made of the quantitative–qualitative divide and the formalization of security studies in particular, but we found only relatively minor differences in engagement between those who use formal and quantitative methods and those who do not. The more interesting results surround questions of whether policy engagement should be part of standard academic employment and ought to be considered in tenure and promotion processes. In these cases, self-identified quantitative scholars were much less inclined to see policy engagement as part of standard academic employment, and almost one third of quantitative scholars did not agree that policy engagement should be considered for tenure and promotion decisions. To the extent that these views are known—and may be perceived to be even more widespread than they are—they may have important implications in disincentivizing quantitatively inclined junior scholars to engage with the policy world.

One potential interpretation of the gap between whether policy engagement is and whether it ought to be valued in tenure and promotion is functional: incentive structures change when the present set of incentives are insufficient to produce desired behaviors. If most IR scholars are already engaging "for free," at least from the perspective of their primary employers, why make such activities a formal part of assessment and promotion? Why pay for something that you are otherwise getting for free? The exception to this pattern would appear to be the members of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA), who in addition to expecting high-level peer-reviewed scholarship also incorporate policy engagement activities into their tenure and promotion assessments, albeit with less weight (Desch et al. 2022). Regardless, we argue, the puzzle should shift from "why aren't IR scholars engaging the policy world?" to "why are many IR scholars engaging, despite few professional incentives—at least from their primary employers—to do so?"

Finally, the vast majority of respondents agreed that scholars have responsibility for the impact of their policies in the real world. Very few scholars said they had distorted their beliefs to appeal to audiences, although a plurality worried that their colleagues had. This is an interesting perception that is worth further investigation.

The "cult of the irrelevant" narrative seems to dominate disciplinary discussions and popular thinking about IR scholars' participation in policy debates and processes.

Despite this, the results of our survey of IR scholars demonstrate that at least some policy engagement by IR scholars is clearly the norm. Much of that engagement may be of the "quick-win, limited-impact" variety, but a sizable portion of it involves deeper engagement. Regardless of whether we are experiencing a "golden age of engagement," it should be clear that IR scholars are actively engaged in the policy world.

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Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272300035X.

Notes

1 For example, the Bridging the Gap Project (https://bridgingthegapproject.org) and the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship programs (https://www.cfr.org/fellowships/international-affairs-fellowship; https://www.cfr.org/fellowships/international-affairs-fellowship-tenured-international-relations-scholars).

2 Scholarship is relevant when it includes "findings and ideas that are potentially useful to policy practitioners" (Maliniak et al. 2020, 9). Research can be relevant to policy makers and policy processes in different ways and through a variety of mediums, including policy briefs, reports, face-to-face meetings, blog posts, op-eds, interviews, and more, and their relevance may be indirect or hidden and thus hard to establish quantitatively.

3 Weber acknowledged several appropriate roles for scientists related to policy formation: explicitly articulating value positions underlying policy alternatives, envisioning the outcomes of various policy choices, assessing the empirical consequences of different courses of action, and challenging the assumptions of policy makers about the values underpinning their desired policies. These roles roughly correspond to the honest-broker role described by Pielke (2007).

4 Kertzer and Renshon (2022) review work drawing on elite surveys published in the last 20 years in the *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *American Journal of Political Science*, reporting that average response rates for surveys of policy elites in the US is about 15%. Pew Research Center's response rates were 6% in 2018.

5 As of January 2023, the *Washington Post* no longer publishes *The Monkey Cage*.

6 The "prefer not to answer" category included 16 total respondents, while the "nonbinary" category had zero respondents.

7 This tendency is most pronounced among security scholars (Avey et al. 2022, 5).

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