Biopolitics via political psychology
Comment in response to Liesen and Walsh

Rebecca J. Hannagan
Department of Political Science
Northern Illinois University
Zulauf Hall 401
DeKalb, IL 60115
rhannaga@niu.edu

In “The competing meanings of ‘biopolitics’ in political science: Biological and postmodern approaches to politics,” Laurette Liesen and Mary Walsh argue that two very distinct groups of political scientists have organized their work around the term “biopolitics.” The authors suggest that these areas of research are not only qualitatively different, but also potentially contradictory. I agree that the distinction between the camps is a meaningful one. But since the current more “scientific” scholars focusing on biological approaches to politics are not identifying with the term “biopolitics,” it may neither be possible nor necessary to rebrand by attempting to reclaim the term “biopolitics” from the postmodern camp or utilize a label such as “neuropolitics.” Rather, those pursuing this work tend to already identify with the subfield of political psychology—a field that has been expanding to encompass an even more multidisciplinary approach to the study of political attitudes and behavior.

Recent ‘scientific biopolitics’ scholarship

The discipline of political science appeals to many scholars because it is a big tent that accommodates many subfields, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches. Traditionally, there have been five subfields: Comparative Politics, International Relations, American Government and Politics, Political Theory, and Methodology. Though many departments still adhere to this five-category approach to organizing research, hiring faculty, and training graduate students, there are just as many departments that have opted to move away from this traditional categorization. Some departments have undertaken to organize themselves thematically or by methodological approach. “Democratization,” for example, would embody a thematic approach that could unite those who study American government and politics as well as international relations or comparative politics perspectives and would otherwise be separated by the traditional subfield boundaries.

As Liesen and Walsh argue, the more “scientific biopolitics” camp of political scientists organized their work around theory, behavior, and policy. Although the unifying theme throughout their work was taking biology into account in models of human behavior, or using evolution as a way to enhance political theory, it was difficult to have a unified subfield tying behavior, policy and theory together. This may have been particularly true if scholars operated in departments organized by the traditional five-category approach.

In more thematically organized contexts, consistent with the current state of the discipline, it may have been less onerous for those pioneering scholars to unify. Using the term “biopolitics” may have been particularly strategic for those taking, what was in the 1970s and 1980s, a controversial approach. It could also be argued that the strategic use of the term “biopolitics” was necessary to bring coherence to their body of work because there actually was not much coherence among work encompassing the areas of public policy, political behavior, and political theory. Whether it was internal coherence among the body of work or the structure of the larger discipline they were operating in, the subject matter was problematic for