

Education and human capital redefined



Meet GPS's new assistant professor, Agustina Paglayan, who works to improve the quality and equity of education systems, in both developing and developed countries alike

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News



Professor [Agustina Paglayan](#) is an expert voice on education policy. In a dual appointment at the School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) and the Department of Political Science at UC San Diego, Paglayan is working to understand what motivates politicians to expand access to education and improve the quality of schooling.

“There is a growing interest in understanding how politics shapes education policy and other policy areas,” said Paglayan. “You can’t change education policy if you don’t understand how it’s made. This dual appointment will allow me to do research that is policy relevant and contributes to our theoretical understanding of the formation of education policy.”

Paglayan has always been eager to promote positive change in the world. In addition to her interdisciplinary academic training, she brings to GPS extensive policy experience through her work at the Center for Global Development, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Yet academia always called her back.

“I took a very scientific approach to my career choice. I already knew I was interested in studying education policy, but I wanted to test alternatives,” recalls Paglayan. “In these different jobs, I kept wanting to go back to education. At a certain point, I realized I had enough evidence, the time had come.”

As a native of Argentina, Paglayan grew up wondering what went wrong in a country that was once admired for its education system, but that today is at the bottom of international rankings of student achievement. She has turned her curiosity about the causes of this deterioration into a robust research agenda spanning multiple countries. Her research looks at how political factors as varied as domestic conflict, democracy and teacher union strength, shape education provision and why some politicians but not others adopt education policies

conducive to the formation of human capital.

“Although I was first trained in economics, and in thinking about what is the optimal policy given a set of budget constraints, growing up in a developing country I’ve always been sensitive to how politics shapes which policy choices are feasible,” said Paglayan. “That was largely what led me to become a political scientist, wanting to understand how politics shapes education. In many instances, politicians know what to do to promote student learning, or know what would be technically right, but choose another course of action.”

Focusing on what motivates politicians to provide education, her award-winning paper [“Civil War, State Consolidation, and the Spread of Mass Education”](#) looks at the origins of public primary school systems in Latin America and Europe. Conceptualizing mass education as a tool to consolidate power, it examines the impact of civil war on the formation and expansion of education systems.

The paper, which will be the basis of her first book, was awarded the [American Political Science Association](#)’s 2018 Fiona McGillivray Award for best Political Economy paper. In it, she examines how times of internal political disorder propel political elites to use mass education as a means to instill values, develop deference to the state’s authority and prevent future rebellions.

“When Latin American countries decided to set up primary school systems, what was at the back of their mind was the importance of shaping the moral character of the masses,” said Paglayan. “It wasn’t about teaching them skills to become more productive workers, it was largely driven by an interest to reduce disorder through indoctrination.”

Domestically, her work has studied the role of collective bargaining and striking among teacher unions. In her most recent paper, [“Public-Sector Unions and the Size of the Government,”](#) published in the [American Journal of Political Science](#), Paglayan shows that granting collective bargaining rights to teachers in the U.S. did not generally lead to higher public spending on education.

“There is an assumption that teacher unions are one of the most powerful actors shaping education policy decisions, and that collective bargaining is a key mechanism by which they influence policy,” said Paglayan. “I wanted to test that by looking at whether collective bargaining with teachers led to a change in personnel and financial decisions in education systems.”

Workers in the U.S. private sector have had collective bargaining and strike rights since the 1930s. But public-sector teachers were prohibited from engaging in collective bargaining and from striking up until the 1960s. While the introduction of collective bargaining rights sometimes led to higher teacher salaries and education spending, this was not the norm.

“In the public sector, 33 states gave teachers collective bargaining rights in the 1960s and 70s, but in most of these states, teachers’ ability to strike was curtailed at the same time that collective bargaining rights were introduced,” said Paglayan. “Striking is the main weapon workers typically have in a negotiation. Without it, working conditions rarely improve through collective bargaining.”

Paglayan’s passion for education also reflects in her enthusiasm for teaching. Through her courses, she hopes to inspire the next generation of policy experts. In the fall, she will teach Politics and Institutions in Latin America, and next year she will teach a course on education policy around the world.

“Policy students tend to be very passionate. Because I was an MPP student once, I am attuned to their general professional interests,” said Paglayan. “It’s nice to have that energy of people who want to change the world. I share that same enthusiasm and desire.”

3 questions with Assistant Professor Agustina Paglayan

What is your academic focus?

I study what motivates politicians to expand access to education and improve its quality and equity, and what motivates them *not* to do this, in both developing and developed countries around the world.

What are the real-world impacts of your research?

My research is directly motivated by my prior experience working in international development organizations. I was struck by how much emphasis was given to identifying and disseminating what the “right” education policies to promote learning are, as if the main reason why education systems fail to promote adequate learning is that politicians don’t know how to do better. By shedding light on how political incentives and institutions—and not just technical

knowledge—affect politicians’ education policy choices, my work is helping reshape the conversation about what it will take to improve education systems around the world.

What skills or understanding do you hope students leave your class with?

I will teach two courses for GPS students: Politics and Institutions in Latin America (PILA) this fall, and a course comparing education policy across the Americas (EdPol) next year. I hope students will leave PILA with a solid and general understanding of what politics looks like in Latin America and how it shapes the region’s economic development. I hope students will leave EdPol knowing what are the main challenges that education systems face, what are the main debates that exist on how to address these challenges, and how to think analytically about the pros and cons of different education policy “solutions”.