

Introducing

Elise Pizzi

Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa

Elise Pizzi is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa. Her research focuses on public goods provision and the effect of public goods provision on human development outcomes. Her current work explores safety provision and risk mitigation as extreme climate and weather shocks become more severe and frequent. This interview covers Elise's work on government response to natural disasters, the impact of Hukou policies on migration patterns in China, and her approach to research and teaching.



Let's start with what has captured your interest recently, either in your research or personal life?

Lately, I've been focusing on government response to natural disasters. Natural disasters around the world are always in the news. Where I live in Iowa, we had three years of drought followed by major spring flooding and one of the most active tornado seasons on record. As a happy side-effect of COVID restrictions on fieldwork travel, I worked with colleagues and undergraduate students locally to interview emergency responders around the state to learn about disaster management. Since then, I have expanded these studies to look at disaster response globally. This international research led me to develop an undergraduate course on The Politics of Natural Disasters, where we look at theories of governance and crisis response and apply them to understand recent disaster events worldwide. I hope to continue researching the similarities and differences between crisis and everyday governance.

In your publication "How Does Government Policy Shape Migration Decisions? The Case of China's Hukou System" with Hu Yue, you explore the impact

of Hukou policies on migration patterns in China. Could you elaborate on the key findings of your study and the implications for understanding the relationship between government policy and migration?

Hu Yue (Tsinghua University) and I began this research to understand what factors shape the choice of destination for migrants and potential migrants within China. We specifically wanted to look at social benefits like access to schools, linguistic differences across regions, and differences in environmental conditions. This article focuses on the social benefits associated with local Hukou registration.

The Hukou, or household registration system, assigns citizens a permanent residency location, determining what benefits they can receive and where. For example, benefits for local Hukou registration might include access to public schools. Still, children of temporary migrants living in a city without the local Hukou are not guaranteed free access to public education. Cities determine criteria for gaining local Hukou status and determine access to rights and benefits like healthcare, access to public schools, and even some jobs in their cities.

There's been some debate about the importance of the status itself. We found that migrants want to move to cities where they can get social benefits, even if they can't get the full permanent local status. These benefits are especially important as migration patterns have shifted to include more families. Migration is complicated, and our research highlighted just one of the key factors shaping decisions. As the population in China decreases and cities begin to compete for residents, cities can appeal to potential migrants by offering social services to temporary residents.

One factor we did not have space to discuss in the article is the local environment. We found that migrants—even those primarily driven by economic factors—strongly prefer cities with clean air and water. I hope that we will be able to return to this topic in the future and explore the relative importance of social benefits and the environment over time.

"These anecdotes help students who have never left Iowa understand how different (or similar) development challenges can be across the world and appreciate the complexities involved in changing development patterns."

Before pursuing your Ph.D., you spent time teaching English in China and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Georgia. How did these experiences shape your approach to research and teaching in political science?

I moved to China to teach English after college and then spent two years in Georgia as a Peace Corps volunteer working with a local NGO. These and other international experiences inform my research and teaching every day by giving me stories and anecdotes to draw on and helping me identify puzzles and patterns that are clearest when comparing contexts.

At the University of Iowa, I teach development theories that apply worldwide. I find it helpful to ground these general theories with specific stories from living and teaching abroad. When discussing education, I tell students about conditions in the boarding school in China where I taught. I can tell stories about the difficult process the local NGO in Georgia undertook to convince teachers and parents to support the integration of students with disabilities into public schools. These anecdotes help students who have never left Iowa understand how different (or similar) development challenges can be across the world and appreciate the complexities involved in changing development patterns.

My experiences also shape the research questions I ask. While I was in Georgia, local public goods provision reforms were ongoing. Changes in the pricing and organizational structure for electricity and water led our household to drastically cut our electricity usage and shift how we used our water. I also observed new procedures for local school board elections as Georgia decentralized its school management and adopted school governance practices similar to those of the US. These observations made me question some of my assumptions about resource management and public goods provision and how formal practices interact with established norms and cultures. These experiences have also given me a love for fieldwork's unexpected lessons and challenges.

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