

# **Political Science & Political Education**

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In the spirit of a workshop, for which it is intended, this paper pretends to be nothing more than a preliminary draft. Even then, it is the draft of only a sketch – more an outline for research than a detailed research program, one might say, an attempt to raise a few questions about the shape of the discipline of political science, about what we teach both undergraduates and graduates, and about whether or how we serve the political world we examine. The painters of frescoes call their sketches “cartoons,” so I want to assure the reader at the outset that my aim is not to caricature; if anything I write appears cartoonish, it is because I am sketching, rather than mocking. I sketch in part because it is the only way I can survey the whole – though also, I admit, because of my ignorance of the color and the texture of all the parts.

Here is the problem with which I began, or rather the problems, for there are several. First, political science as a discipline lives on the fault line between the “two cultures” in the academy, the sciences and the humanities; although one might allege the same for social science as a whole, political scientists receive funding from and play an active role in both the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. After some evidence of rapprochement between science and the humanities in the 1980s, hardly anyone doubts that the sciences today are in the ascendancy.<sup>1</sup> I have never heard it claimed that progress in political science bears any responsibility for the return of scientific prestige – the rapid pace of technological innovation, the mapping of the human genome with its promise of medical advances, the emergence of neuroscience and evolutionary biology, and even the return of free-market economics are more likely candidates – but scientific methodology in political science probably benefits by affinity. The “perestroika” movement in political science is in part a response to this situation, I think, but maybe also a way of saving face.

The second problem, related to the first, is what I see as a growing divide between graduate training in political science and undergraduate instruction. In part this relates to the divide between research and teaching that characterizes every academic discipline; learning the basics in a well-established science is thought to be akin to laying a foundation, which, if soundly placed, can be built upon and not revisited by those responsible for raising up the superstructure. In part the undergraduate-graduate divide reflects the trend towards specialization that disciplines achieve as they mature; we still allow our undergraduates to be generalists, if only so that they can decide what specialty to choose, but a researcher eschews specialization at his peril. In part, the divide reflects the prestige of science just alluded to, in combination with the pressures of professionalism: mastery of ever-more-sophisticated techniques distinguishes the expert from the amateur. If the expert’s knowledge is genuine, this is something to be desired,

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<sup>1</sup> C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, intro. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; orig. 1959); William T. Bluhm, Margaret G. Hermann, Walter F. Murphy, John S. Nelson, Lucian W. Pye, APSA’s NEH Liaison Committee, “Political Science and the Humanities: A Report to the American Political Science Association,” *PS* 18 (1985): 247-59.

not avoided – who would want a surgeon who disdained laparoscopy, for example? – though it still raises the question, evident in the “hard” sciences as well, how to translate expert knowledge into laymen’s terms, or in other words, how to teach undergraduates. If the layman doubts the expert’s knowledge, he suspects the technique marks a privilege, not a tool.

A third problem concerns the reliance in political science upon the fact/value distinction. Although critiques of the distinction are well known and even widely accepted, the distinction itself has proven remarkably resilient and remains the basis for much political science today. On the one hand, political scientists now acknowledge that their terms of analysis are not value-free or neutral, and they readily admit that their own political values influence the research questions that they ask, but as long as they don’t fudge the data, they don’t think this calls into question the scientific character of their enterprise. They rely, I think, on their moral and political consensus as liberal democrats or as believers in human rights, sustained by a pragmatic view of the enterprise of science: after all, if the natural scientists can remain agnostic about metaphysics, content to ask “how?” not “what?” or “why?”, surely political science can teach us something useful without having to commit on first principles. On the other hand, there is something about that distinction that captures a reality in political life. What others – members of other parties, of other countries, of other cultures, of other faiths – hold to be good and noble and just is often impervious to our influence even when we appeal only to reason: others’ values are to us brute facts. Thus, while it may be true that in principle what we call “values” are subject to revision and rethinking in the light of rational argument, that is, that they embody knowledge, not only attitude or opinion, because most people don’t look around or listen, most values in practice are not going to be reviewed or rethought. Modern identity politics makes a virtue of this necessity and further erodes the one core of values it is not thought intolerant to attack, namely, classical rationalism. Meanwhile science hums along, studying opinion and attitudes and much else, accepting its own activity as merely valued by those who are interested.

A fourth problem concerns widespread frustration with American democracy from within, contempt for the cynicism that seems endemic to both political parties and a yearning for a more authentic democratic life. To be sure, this has spurred no known revolutionary movement; we might even laugh at the thought, so sure we are that “the system” is so stable and the discontent so chronic that no consequences will follow, at least so long as the economy maintains sufficiently widespread well-being in our society and the costs of war at the margins can be absorbed. The “culture wars” generate lots of noise, but in practice both sides live more similarly to one another than they say; political candidates tap public hopes but inevitably are constrained in what they can actually change once in office. Abroad the differences matter, to be sure, so perhaps it is no accident – it is certainly a matter of no small moment – that differences on foreign policy reflect and affect the way we project what we think democracy is or ought to be to the rest of the world. But Americans, while often enough eager as individuals to move throughout the world, as a people seem to want the world to simply leave us alone. And this, too, conforms to the scientific side of our discipline’s research program: We can

watch and measure what is happening, with neither turn-of-the-century optimism nor Cold War gloom.

Since I am merely sketching, I am not ready to say whether these four problems or concerns all have a single root cause; though all have in some way or another to do with the hegemony of modern science, some are purely intellectual, others more political. What I do want to suggest is that they all concern the relation of political science to political education. By “political education” I mean the way in which a society passes along to the next generation the knowledge needed to govern; in America, political education means how we as a society prepare ourselves for self-government. The hypothesis I want to suggest comes from Aristotle’s *Politics* (1337a15): the character of education corresponds to the character of the regime. The notion of regime, which as *politeia* or polity was the central concept of Aristotelian political science, has been revived in modern American political science and is again recognizable: a regime is a pattern of ordering political life, defining who rules and to what end or purpose. Aristotle applied the term to the pattern of rule in the city or *polis*, but modern usage is less restrictive. Cities still have patterns of “who governs,” but so do states, even large ones, and even abstract systems, such as the world economy. Without ignoring Aristotle’s preference for the smaller *polis*, the community where every citizen who mattered could know every other, or at least someone who knew those he didn’t, I will use the term for now in its modern sense.

Let me propose, then, that political education corresponds to the regime and thus that political science, which aims to inform political education, corresponds to the regime as well. At one level this might seem trivial: Who doubts that American political science today is guided in the questions it asks and even the methods it adopts by our country being a liberal democracy? But I mean to add nuance by reference to the sound observation by scholars of American political development that our liberal or constitutional democracy has progressed through a series of regimes, registering changes in our institutions and political practices as well as change in the dominant players in political life. Let me characterize the succession of regimes as follows: republicanism, democracy, progressivism, pluralism. My hypothesis, then, is that political education and therewith political science have changed along with the regime. Moreover, I am going to suggest that in the United States, since we continue to live in accord with a Constitution written in 1787 and with a political tradition that, for all its changes, is continuous since 1776 when independence from Great Britain was declared, the coming of a new regime has never replaced the previous one, only added to it; awkward as it is to articulate, it is not misleading to say we live in pluralist progressive democratic republic. This means, I suppose, that we have a mixed regime – but that’s hardly a surprise in the context of an Aristotelian analytic. If this is so, we ought to expect our political science to reflect it, and it would make sense to endorse a congruent political education.

What would development of political education look like if it paralleled the step-by-step development of the regime? As a model, consider the parallel development of the American press. In the republican era, the patrician-led parties subsidized friendly papers in the major cities; with the advent of universal (white male) suffrage came the

“penny press,” profitable enterprises that generally avoided partisan affiliation though their editorial pages followed their owners’ call. The standard of professional objectivity among reporters at papers that had become institutions in their own right typified the Progressive Era, while the age of pluralism added numerous competing sources of news and saw professional objectivity challenged, though not abandoned. If this account is accurate, calling the press the “fourth estate” is corroborated: to vary with the regime is in a way to be a part of it.

Can the same be said of political education? A fascinating history dissertation from the 1930s revised and published with the American Political Science Association suggests the possibility.<sup>2</sup> In colonial days through the years of the early republic, political education appeared chiefly as a branch of moral philosophy or ethics, including some analysis of institutions and, in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth, study of political economy as well. The moral-philosophical bent of this study is apparent in the disputation topics recorded in the records of Harvard, Yale, and other early schools; here are some topics, with years indicated:

“Is it lawful to sell Africans?” (1724)

“Is it lawful to resist the supreme magistrate, if the commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved?” (1743)

“Is civil government absolutely necessary for men?” (1758)

“Are the people the sole judges of their rights and liberties?” (1769)

“Is capital punishment as effective in deterring men from crime, as sentence to hard labor for life?” (1769)

“Whether Congress ought to have more power and authority?” (1783)

“Whether juries are a real benefit to the state?” (1786)

“Whether Christianity has proved of advantage to civil government?” (1788)

“Whether moral wrong is ever a political good?” (1789)

“Ought the poor to be supported by law?” (1813)

“Ought foreign immigration to be encouraged?” (1813)

“Would a division of the Union be beneficial?” (1814)<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of the first – answered, by the way, in the negative, long before any organized movement for abolition appeared – many of the topics sound perennial, and few of them would be amenable today to methods more modern than philosophical analysis.

In his account of the emergence of democracy in Jacksonian America, Alexis de Tocqueville says very little about American colleges or the political education they offered. Instead, the democrats he depicts learn politics by participating in politics, developing habits of citizenship and subscribing to the doctrine of self-interest properly

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1900* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35, 103, 105. The 1743 disputation was Samuel Adams’, argued in the affirmative, as was the 1758 topic that belonged to John Adams.

understood. Tocqueville knows that some teaching takes place even among the unschooled; he calls juries the free schools of democracy well aware that juries are instructed from the bench as they go about their deliberations. Still, his emphasis again and again in the book is on political institutions and the formation of democratic citizens through democratic activity. He has heard of and perhaps saw the emerging public schools, but does not treat them as the cradle of citizenship. He is aware of the role of religion in America, too, and considers it crucial to moral formation, especially of women, but he attributes to religion political constraint, not political education. Such is the extreme point reached by liberty and equality in the young United States that learning politics has to be done under the authority of no man but the individual, whose formation by institutions goes practically unnoticed by himself.<sup>4</sup>

The Progressives restored the importance of schooling to political education; indeed, this movement sought to transform and indeed to build the apparatus of the American state, while organizing and centralizing many institutions of civil society. Influenced throughout by European learning, sometimes British, often German, the Progressives made the study of public administration central to political knowledge. Confident that scientific management could more efficiently and more honestly address social needs than the old regime of courts and parties, much less the chaos of the market, they organized many of the institutions and practices that constitute our world today: the research university with its Ph.D. degree, scholarly journals for the dissemination of research findings, national professional associations for academic disciplines responsible for setting goals and standards,<sup>5</sup> analysis of public policy, and much more. Indeed, the notion that political science is an academic profession charged in a special way with the education of citizens and public servants is a Progressive ideal.

The behavioral revolution in political science belongs, then, to the era of American pluralism, what we still call the “postwar” era. This is hardly a surprise, except that the scientific character of behaviorist studies, precisely insofar as it imitates the natural sciences, suggests a distance, even a difference in kind, between the object studied and the researcher and so makes the simultaneous emergence of a certain form of democracy and a certain way of studying democracy appear coincidental, not linked. As new groups become active in politics, it makes a certain sense that they need a neutral vocabulary through which to understand their interactions with one another, and with which to measure and assess one another’s political strength; seen from another perspective, the resort to objective analysis appears as a way of avoiding sympathetic understanding and the hard task of seeing things through others’ eyes, sharing their

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<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. vol. I, part 2, ch. 8-9, and vol. II, pt. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See, for an important example, William Munro, “Report of the Committee on Policy of the American Political Science Association: Appendix VII: Instruction in Political Science in Colleges and Universities,” *American Political Science Review* 24 (1930): 127-45. See also Harold M. Dorr et al., *Goals for Political Science: Report of the Committee for the Advancement of Teaching, American Political Science Association* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951).

experiences and grasping – sometimes dialectically, by challenging – their reasons. Though it might seem curious at first that behaviorism and its critics (who once, hopefully, called their movement “post-behaviorism”) have persisted through several generations in political science, but perhaps that is precisely what pluralism means: contradictions are not to be resolved but accommodated, allowed to live side by side. The starker the pluralisms, the unbridgeable differences, the greater the need for analysis that takes no sides, even if it thereby has nothing to say about some things.

Is our democracy still pluralistic, our practice still defined by “interest group liberalism”? From the perspective of political development taken thus far it is too soon to tell, though if ours is an age or, if you will, a regime that minimizes the state in the name of global capitalism or that sees state power only in instrumental terms, the rational choice approach might claim to be its academic representative. An alternate possibility is that our democracy, after the novelty of new approaches has faded, is willing to accept its settled constitutional character, finding a place in a complex array not only for the multiple and independent institutions of civil society but also for the different traditions of thought and inquiry that have donned the name of political science over the course of American history. If that describes the mixed form of the contemporary polity, so it ought to indicate a similar array in political education: something from republicans, something from democrats, something from progressives, something from pluralists. All agree that in political science the method employed needs to fit the question posed and the data available. This suggests that the plurality of methods respects as well the inevitable complexity of political questions and the necessary elusiveness of political data. And it suggests, too, that political education that encompasses a mix of fields does not avoid, but rather embraces, the political world in which we live.