

Why Political Science Is Left But Not PC:  
Causes of disunion and diversity

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Some facts are so obvious that not even a behavioral political scientist would demand proof. One of these is that the vast majority of card-carrying political scientists in America today are on the left of the political spectrum. The result of this fact is that the general orientation of the discipline's professional association (APSA) and the major research university departments in political science is decidedly liberal. The ideological disposition within the profession is so pervasive that it usually goes unnoticed. For most political scientists, as for most social scientists, the intellectual sun rises on the left and sets on the right.

The liberal disposition of the political science profession is no way contradicted by a series of well-publicized outbursts that have taken place within the association over the years, in which some have noisily charged APSA with being insufficiently “engaged” and too “conservative.” A cursory examination of these incidents reveals that the epithet “conservative” has served only as a figure of speech. These conflicts have all been internecine affairs of the left, with those on the far left attempting to supplant those on the moderate left. It has never been a question of *genuine* conservatives—those who might have thought well of, or even voted for, a Republican like Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. There have never been enough of them in the profession to matter.

Universities are not representative bodies and should therefore not be held to the standard of what political theorist Hannah Pitkin once called “descriptive representation,”<sup>1</sup> or a mirroring of the society at large. Still, it is impossible not to remark that the percentage of conservatives in academia falls far below what is found within the American public at large, a condition that we label here as the “conservative representational deficit” (CRD). CRD would probably not be a matter of concern in many technical or humanistic disciplines within the universities, if professors in fact kept to their subject matter (alas, they often do not). But things are different in

the social sciences, where a basic social philosophy (liberalism or conservatism) falls so close to the object of the inquiries that it often cannot help but affect what is thought and taught. This is above all the case in political science. The absence of a reasonable “political” balance in the profession can easily compromise the objectivity of the entire field.

In a discipline that prides itself today on the study of causality, it is regrettable that no major work has yet appeared that seeks to explain the existence of CRD. Scientific inquiries into explaining variance, it appears, still often find their genesis in researchers’ intuitive reaction to what they perceive to be an anomaly or a problem. But in a profession that thinks liberal, the presence of so few conservatives probably does not seem to most in the least anomalous or problematic. On reflection, it would probably be counted a blessing. As to the concerns of some conservatives about the absence of diversity within the field, the response of the liberal mainstream is that diversity involves matters far more important than fundamental differences of viewpoint; it is a question instead of representing different racial, ethnic and sexual categories. Finally, on the rare occasions when members of the profession have been forced to confront the question of CRD, they invariably attribute it in the first instance to “self-selection,” arguing, for example, that because political science focuses on government and the state, and because conservatives don’t think much of the state, it is natural that liberals flock to the profession while conservatives go off to earn their livelihood in the market. Or they will congratulate themselves on the fact that the political science profession does much “better” in representing conservatives than do sociology, anthropology or history, occasionally even honoring prominent conservatives with the highest offices in the association. Many political scientists can plausibly boast—and do—that some of their own best acquaintances are conservatives.

For conservatives, this grab bag of excuses for explaining CRD is apt to appear woefully inadequate. True enough, conservatives in political science do receive more equitable treatment than in many other disciplines in the social sciences. But then the real question to begin with is not why conservatives do so much better in political science, but why they fare so poorly in these other disciplines. In any case, however, the most important consideration in the end is not the causes of CRD (a matter which is treated elsewhere in this volume), but its consequences for members of the profession and for the academic enterprise as a whole. Does the limited number of conservatives result in injustices for conservative political scientists, and does it diminish the intellectual vitality of the discipline?

### **Perceptions**

Under representation resulting from pure self-selection is one thing, outright discrimination—of which there are only a few blatant cases—is something quite different. But in between these two alternatives is a larger and vaguer category, one of systematic bias that is produced by attitudes and practices that emit certain distinct and perceptible signals. One point is clear. Political scientists who are conservative often fear that their ideological orientation can harm them in hiring and advancement. Are they merely being paranoid, or is this a case where the paranoids also have real reason to be worried?

If the plural of anecdote is data, there is at least a certain amount of evidence of a systematic anti-conservative bias that might make the profession less inviting to conservatives.

With names withheld to protect the innocent, here are a few “incidents”:

- A talented young graduate student, conservative in his political views, was reluctant to apply for a fellowship at the American Enterprise Institute and at the Heritage Foundation for fear of how this would look on his vita when applying for academic

jobs. This student consulted one of the most respected figures in the discipline, a liberal, who advised him that AEI might pose no problem, but that the Heritage Foundation could indeed prove a problem at many places. Further inquiries made with those who run these programs at both of these institutions reveals that those who run these fellowship programs are acutely aware of this problem. By contrast, no such stigma attaches to fellowships at the liberal-leaning Brookings Institute.

- A number of conservative assistant professors report being advised of the need to be highly circumspect in the expression of their political views during their probationary period. While the same might be said of certain radical views on the Left, mainstream liberal views almost never present any problems.
- Some conservatives are proudly displayed as the “house conservative,” used to prove the broad mindedness of the department. They may even enjoy a certain iconic status and be laughingly and good-naturedly referred to as “our conservative.” By contrast, no one ever treat a liberal in this manner in a major university. Conservatives who have left academia, often for a position in a Washington think tank, are known to greet conservative friends still in the academy with some version of the question “are they treating you well there?”—with the implication that a conservative faculty member resembles a spouse in a potentially abusive marriage. Even if the relationship starts well, it could go south at any time.
- Speaking of spouses, the experiences of the spouses of conservative professors (mostly wives) with the spouses of their colleagues have often been highly unpleasant. As the wives have less need to be careful, what they say is more revealing of the general atmosphere of the academy. Many are the cases where the wives of

conservatives have reported being berated for having husbands who could “really” have voted for Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. They have been made to feel as out of place as liberals in certain country clubs.

One could go on, of course, to cite more explicit tales. On leaving his political science department at Northern Arizona University for a free market think tank, conservative professor Michael Sanera lamented that “our department has Marxists, communitarians, people who think that Castro has the only democracy in the world, and then it's got moderate liberals and Kennedy-Mondale kind of liberals, but the only two people that were right of center were driven out.” This is perhaps an extreme version of what many conservatives often experience in a less cataclysmic way. If conservatives were inclined to use the language—which they steadfastly resist—they might even complain of being “marginalized” within political science. To the neutral observer, it can be said that they sometimes display behavior patterns similar to certain other marginalized groups, which include attempting to signal identity to potential confederates in perceived hostile territory by such means such a dropping the name of a certain author, or mentioning in passing a group like the NAS (National Association of Scholars), to see if it evokes a sympathetic response.<sup>2</sup>

Do these complaints have any objective basis in reality? Let a candid world judge.

### **Realities: history and data**

Abused or not, conservatives have generally been on the outside in the profession. Their second-class status reverts all the way back to the foundation of the American Political Science Association (APSA), which was created by those who had a progressive caste of mind. The Association's founding fathers led by Frank Goodnow broke away from the American Economic Association, which they judged to be too laissez-faire, and the American Historical Association,

which they considered to be too politically uninvolved and conservative.<sup>3</sup> APSA was founded not with a distant academic objective in mind, but with the practical aim of helping to put the knowledge of science to work in the furtherance of rational social policy. The Association's pro-government viewpoint is nicely captured by John S. Dryzek<sup>4</sup> in his account of the genesis of APSA, which commences with the phrase "in the beginning was the state." Indeed, for the founding generation of APSA the state did loom as a kind of deity, invoked at every turn. In his inaugural presidential address to the association in 1904, Frank Goodnow spoke of the role of political science in promoting the "realization of State will." Of course, there was to be nothing overtly partisan in this effort. The fulfillment of progressive aims was to take place in accord with the canons of social science, which the founding generation of political scientists was convinced supported state-oriented measures. As John Gunnell describes this delicate political program, "the dilemma that faced the founders of [APSA] was how to eschew partisanship but gain authority in matters of public policy."<sup>5</sup>

The liberal orientation of the profession also helps to account for some of the official stances taken by the Association itself. In the most notable case, the Association established and endorsed a report, written by E.E. Schattschneider, that favored "responsible party government" and an executive centered approach that was unfriendly to traditional separation of powers.<sup>6</sup> The report embodied the standard liberal view of the period, which continued in effect until 1994, when liberals, fearing they had lost prospects for securing a majority in Congress, suddenly began to sing hymns of praise to the old doctrine of checks and balances. (For those unaware of the history, the attraction of the responsible party position for liberalism is that it was thought to help remove obstacles that stood in the way of rapid action, thus favoring planning and a more active federal government.)

Following the full confirmation of the behavioral revolution in political science in the 1960s, which sought to introduce strict canons of neutrality into scholarship, APSA became more “professional” in its orientation and avoided taking explicit stands. But a push for re-engagement in the world has since re-emerged, and the Association has taken to forming “task forces” to study critical issues. The first of appeared in 2004 and was devoted to a topic of special concern to liberals, the rise of economic inequality in America.<sup>7</sup> The authors concluded that they had discovered “disturbing deficits and trends that undermine the promise of American democracy in an era of persistent and rising social inequalities.” In the tradition of Frank Goodnow, they embraced numerous “pro-state” positions to solve the dire problems they had identified. The report appeared with the caveat that it expressed the “opinions solely of the task force members... [and that] no opinion statements of fact, or conclusions in the report should be attributed to the American Political Science Association.” It nevertheless bore the imprimatur of APSA and was widely promoted by it.

The report was interesting for having either ignored or never considered the objections that one kind of conservative was certain to raise. In a commentary on the report, Robert Weissberg of the University of Illinois issued a rejoinder that was as spirited and lively in its style as the report was pompous and dull. Entitled “Politicized Pseudo-Science,” Weissberg’s article contended that the whole report was an exercise of leftist “agitprop.” He included such provocative passages as: “Conceptual sloppiness—a bizarre vision of democracy, a politics-as-the-source of all wealth cosmology, equating accomplishment with unearned ‘privilege,’ and so on—are sufficiently fatal to relegate the project to history’s dustbin....Such foolishness would probably have disappeared if a few ‘conservatives’ joined the Task Force, but inclusiveness might, regrettably, have doomed the report at conception.”<sup>8</sup>

The orientation of the professional association, however, probably only reflects the disposition of the membership and, more broadly, of the profession. Data gathered on members of the profession clearly establishes its liberal leanings. Going back to 1959, an early survey showed that political scientists in America preferred Democratic over Republican presidential candidates by a 70-19% (3.7 to 1) margin; they were even better disposed toward the Democratic party, favoring it over the Republican party by a 74-16% (4.6 to 1) margin.<sup>9</sup> In the mid 1980s, Walter Roettger found that political scientists voted for Walter Mondale over Ronald Reagan by well over five to one.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Christopher J. Bosso's 1987 survey of presidential and congressional scholars, not known for being the most liberal scholars in the discipline, found Mondale preferred over Reagan by a 77-21% margin.<sup>11</sup> More recent survey work by Klein and Stern finds Democrats outnumbering Republicans among political scientists by a ratio of 5.6 to 1, which is well under the 21.1-1 ratio in Anthropology and Sociology, and the 8.5-1 ratio in History.<sup>12</sup> (Economics, the most conservative, is still 2.9-1 Democratic.) Conventional party identification figures may actually understate the degree to which conservative ideas are underrepresented in the academy. In examining views on specific economic and social issues, Klein and Stern showed that both Democratic and Republican academics are generally farther to the left than their counterparts within the mass public.

The problem of CRD (conservative under representation) is manifested in another way. There is some evidence to suggest that the more prominent Political Science programs, the ones that teach the most gifted undergraduates and produce the graduate degrees, are particularly deficient in conservative representation. Some enterprising researchers were able to discover that in the Harvard's Politics department, only one member registered Republican (wish to guess whom?) as against twenty members registered with the Democratic Party or smaller parties to its

left). Similarly, a 1987 study showed the Stanford Political Science Department having a 22-2 distribution.<sup>13</sup> The well-regarded UC-San Diego program pitched a perfect liberal shut out, 27-0!<sup>14</sup>

It is only possible to begin to speculate on the costs of an ideologically skewed discipline. A monochrome field limits the sort of public policy questions asked, retarding the pursuit of knowledge. Sometimes the effects are not even subtle. For example, as Steven M. Teles<sup>15</sup> shows, the public had determined by the 1970s that AFDC was not working, and yet policy analysts continued to deny it. Similarly, as George Kelling and William Sousa write in *Do Police Matter?*,<sup>16</sup> political science professors (among others) refused to study the success of the New York City Police Department's reforms, rather than encouraging other cities to adopt like reforms. In so doing, as Heritage Foundation Political Scientist Robert Moffit puts it, the academic establishment failed to acknowledge "the greatest public administration success story of the last 25 years."

But a more important toll is no doubt exacted in the form of a political uniformity that is found among the faculties of so many academic departments. As such critics as Martin Anderson<sup>17</sup> point out, this situation makes for a less interesting environment for both faculty and students, favoring a dull careerism over the energy of contending ideas about the many great political issues that confront the nation. It is an obvious fact that some of the finest minds in political science on the conservative side, including Charles Murray and Peter Berkowitz, have exited, voluntarily or involuntarily, from regular academic positions to serve within the think-tank world in Washington D.C. or in government positions. The academy's loss may be the nation's gain, as the "conversation" in the nation's capital has been greatly enlivened as a result.

## Sources of Diversity

There are two ways of looking at the problem of CRD in political science. One, which we have pursued up to now, is to consider the glass as four-fifths empty; the other, to which we now turn, is to regard the glass as one-fifth full. And in fairness to the profession of political science, it is one-fifth full, at least.

Comments by the representatives of many book publishers who are sentenced by their superiors to attend the professional meetings of academic disciplines confirm an impression that is held by many academic refugees from other professions who visit the annual APSA convention. It is that the Political Science meeting is by far the most lively and interesting of all the professional association conventions. The reason is not only the variety of approaches and methods employed in the profession, but also the diversity of perspectives, stemming in part from the solid contingent of conservatives (both in a political and cultural sense) that are found within the profession. The series of panel programs put on by some of the conservative institutes, which are widely attended, are only one example of the richness that differences in political and social viewpoint bring to the profession.

The fact is that political science in this respect *is* different from most of the other disciplines in the social sciences. If one considers the question of conservative representation in academia from a comparative and longitudinal perspective, not only is the problem of CRD less acute in political science than in other disciplines, it has also been getting worse more slowly than in other fields. Klein and Stern have shown that the social sciences and humanities as whole have moved from a four to one liberal to conservative ratio in the 1960s and early 1970s to an eight to one ratio today. But while most of the social sciences moved markedly to the left during this period, Political Science did so marginally. Conservatives are only slightly less common in

academic Political Science than they were a half-century ago.

Why this relative stability, rather than the more pronounced left turn that occurred in fields such as Anthropology, Sociology, English, Psychology, and Education?<sup>18</sup> Why isn't Political Science as uniformly left as critics like Horowitz<sup>19</sup> maintain? Why have certain fads of political correctness seemingly had less traction within Political Science than in some of these other professions? There are a number of possible reasons, no one of which alone is sufficient to explain the result. Perhaps the most important factor over the years has been the influence exerted by certain individuals in the profession, among them Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Edward Banfield, Samuel Huntington, James Q. Wilson, Aaron Wildavsky and Martha Derthick, who, while not all themselves conservatives, helped to make many conservative positions respectable. The more general reasons include the following.

First, one section of political science has a connection to philosophy and to the classics, which has kept alive certain older "conservative" ideas dating back to Aristotle. As Alan Bloom observed, "political science is the only discipline in the university (with the possible exception of the philosophy department) that has a philosophic branch....Political philosophy ... provides at least a reminiscence of those old questions about good and evil and the resources for examining the hidden presuppositions of modern political science and political life."<sup>20</sup> From the political philosophers have come both some of the most radical leftists in the profession as well as some of the most important conservatives, among them Elos Sandoz, Harvey Mansfield, and Harry Jaffa. To this connection to the major political philosophers must be added the special connection of many American political scientists to the political thought of America's founders. Here again the results by means need to be conservative, but the main works of the founding, above all *The Federalist*, certainly lead the mind in the direction of sober and realistic thought

that is more conservative than not its temperament. Say all that one might wish about the thought of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, but “politically correct” would not be a term that would ever come to mind.

Second, there is the subject matter of political science itself, a large part of which deals with the real world and which must confront the “tough” issues of war and peace, terrorism, and revolution. While other disciplines too treat reality, they do not do so in quite these harsh and realistic aspects. The study of such matters will often sober the mind and produce a highly realistic approach to matters. International relations scholars have been all over the map, so to speak, in their ideological orientations, but there is no doubt of the lingering power of certain conservative strands in this area, including Herman Kahn, Henry Kissinger and Albert Wohlstetter. There were even outside institutional support that could often promote this tough or realist perspective, with funds over the years coming from the Defense Department and foundations having conservative perspectives.<sup>21</sup>

Third, American Political Science remains dominated by various versions of the pluralist paradigm. As Richard Merelman’s *Pluralism at Yale*, a fascinating study of the leading department of the 1955-70 period makes plain, a commitment to pluralism as a political theory encouraged leading professors to tolerate “disrupters,” mainly of the left, but at least occasionally of the right. Pluralist thought seemingly made the field too laissez-faire field to purge dissenters. Although the Yale Political Science Department had essentially no conservative professors after the inflammatory Wilmore Kendall, a mentor to William F. Buckley Jr., was paid to surrender tenure and depart in 1961,<sup>22</sup> the Department did not enforce an ideological orthodoxy, producing such prominent center-right political scientists as Aaron Wildavsky, William K. Muir, and Fred Greenstein.

Fourth, political science is in fact less a single discipline with one approach than a holding company for a number of disciplines with a variety of approaches. It is characterized, in comparison to the other social sciences, by its incoherence. Alan Bloom in 1987 described political science s resembling “a rather haphazard bazaar with shops kept by a mixed population.”<sup>23</sup> A similar account was shortly developed by Gabriel Almond<sup>24</sup> put it in his famous essay on “Separate Tables” that characterize political science. APSA can be thought of as an open system ripe for incursion by outsiders, and as Theodore J. Lowi<sup>25</sup> pointed out, from 1981 to 1984 three of the four APSA presidents (Lindblom, Lipset, and Converse) had Ph.D.’s from other fields. The importance of this character of political science is that, under its big tent, there has also been space left for different ideological views.

Two prominent “incursions,” coming from the fields of law and of economics, have kept Political Science open to conservative and libertarian ideas. As for the influence of the law, constitutional law was an important area of study long before the founding of APSA, and it served connect the discipline not only to American Constitution, but also to what Edward Corwin called the “higher law tradition” of natural law found in the medieval and ancient sources. While this part of the discipline has declined somewhat in influence in the past two decades, it remains alive and important, producing such pre-eminent scholars as Michael Zuckert, Robert George, and Keith Whittington. As for the influence of economics, the approach known widely in the field of as “rational choice” had its origins in ideas of political economy that emerged from the more libertarian “Virginia School” of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, and the significantly less pro market “Rochester School” founded by William Riker. To different degrees, each has expressed a degree of skepticism to traditional left of center approaches to public policy.<sup>26</sup> To this could be added a third import from economics, principal-agent theory,

which has stimulated considerable research on public bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup> Arguably, the intellectual framework for the reinventing government movement came from the economics invasion, particularly principal-agent theory.<sup>28</sup> Further, the school choice movement owes much of its intellectual leadership to political economists, particularly to John Chubb and Terry Moe<sup>29</sup> of the Hoover Institution and the Brookings Institution.

Finally, the field of political science is influenced by elections and the general play of elite ideas to a greater degree than other social sciences. In an era when Republicans have won more a substantial number of national elections, political scientists studying elections, Congress, and executive branch policy-making will naturally focus much of their attention on right leaning ideas. Moreover, to a much greater degree than sociologists, political scientists are actually likely to have served in government. The second author's experience suggests that service in the U.S. bureaucracy, and in places like the Brookings Institution, has a moderating impact on left of center academics. This could plausibly make those in the field more open to tolerating conservatives in their midst, in a way that academic sociologists, for example, might not. Further, right leaning dominance in government and certain foundations provides opportunities for research which could in some instances burnish the scholarly credentials of right leaning political scientists.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conclusion: Reforming Political Science**

Although American Political Science is overwhelmingly left or center-left, conservative and libertarian thinkers have kept a toehold in the field, one which is unlikely to soon disappear. The discipline is thus not so unrepresentative as a few conservative critics have charged. Still, a toehold is different than a real place at the table. As long as conservatives are denied this, the disadvantages of ideological homogeneity remain.

So what do to? Conservatism counsels that the world is not easy to change, but that change is always needed. To paraphrase one of the pre-eminent conservatives, Edmund Burke, a profession without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. In this spirit, and while APSA has recently shown itself to be so fond of task forces, the Association should consider establishing a study group to examine whether the current deficit in conservative ideological representation reflects merely the sum of personal choices or is influenced by more systemic factors found in the recruitment and training of Ph.D. candidates, and the hiring and promotion of faculty. Part of this research might involve surveys and focus groups of conservative political scientists and graduate students to measure the degree to which they have perceived ideological discrimination. This research should be conducted in such a way as not to publicly compromise individual institutions. Ideally, the profession of political science should clean its own house before it invites the criticisms of others.

The health and vibrancy of political science today, especially in comparison to some of the other social sciences, stems in large part from its greater openness to different political and social viewpoints. In the end, it is the whole profession that will gain by an enhanced presence of conservatives in its ranks. Fairness in this case is also self-interest rightly understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, the APSA has recognized caucuses for Women, Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Political Scientists, and for a New Political Science---but none for conservatives, nor for the religious ([http://www.apsanet.org/section\\_444.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/section_444.cfm)).

<sup>3</sup> Gunnell, John G. 2006. The Founding of the American Political Science Association: Discipline, Profession, Political Theory, and Politics. *American Political Science Review* 100: 4 (November) 479-86. Information found on p. 481.

<sup>4</sup> Dryzek, John S. 2006. Revolutions Without Enemies: Key Transformations in Political Science. *American Political Science Review* 100: 4 (November) 487-92. Citation found on 487.

<sup>5</sup> Gunnell, John G. 2006. The Founding of the American Political Science Association: Discipline, Profession, Political Theory, and Politics. *American Political Science Review* 100: 4 (November) 479-86. Citation found on 483.

<sup>6</sup> APSA. 1950. Toward a More Responsible Two Party System. A Report on the Committee on Political Parties. *American Political Science Review*. 44 (September 1950).

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- <sup>15</sup> Teles, Steven M. 1996. *Whose Welfare? AFDC and Elite Politics*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
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- <sup>17</sup> Anderson, op. cit., at 146.
- <sup>18</sup> Klein and Stern, op. cit.
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- <sup>26</sup> Almond, op. cit., at 832- 33.
- <sup>27</sup> e.g. Moe, Terry M. 1984. The New Economics of Organization, *American Journal of Political Science* 28: 739-777.
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