

# Political Science and American Political Thought

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## ABSTRACT

Written as a short personal reflection, this article explores the development of political science as an organized professional discipline in the United States. At its inception, political science in the United States was principally concerned with political thought and constitutionalism, and it was taught with the public-spirited purpose of educating for citizenship in a constitutional democracy. Twentieth-century methodological trends at one time threatened to remove political thought and constitutionalism from the curriculum of political science, but recent disciplinary trends suggest that American political thought does have a place in twenty-first-century political science.

“What is your area?” an emeritus political science professor asked at a reception shortly after I had joined the ranks of faculty at the University of Missouri.

“Public law and political theory,” I replied, explaining that I had written my dissertation on the influence of natural-law philosophy on the development of antislavery constitutionalism in the nineteenth century.

“Ah—a throwback!” he exclaimed, with both intrigue and horror in his voice.

A *throwback to what, exactly?* I wondered. Like most graduate students and young professors, I had not spent much time thinking about the soul-searching methodological disputes among social scientists or the history of political science as an organized professional discipline. I simply knew that I enjoyed my political science courses as an undergraduate and thought teaching at a university would be a respectable and enjoyable vocation.

In hindsight, I realize that the courses I had taken as an undergraduate and graduate student were all throwbacks in some sense. At the University of Oklahoma, I enrolled in a course titled “Foundations of American Politics,” in which we read the Mayflower Compact, John Locke’s *Second Treatise*, Founding-era political sermons, the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist*, Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, Washington’s Farewell Address, Tocqueville, and the Lincoln–Douglas Debates. I loved the class and soon changed my major from business to political science, rounding out my studies with courses on political philosophy, constitutional law, and foreign policy.

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Introduced to political science in this way, I understood the discipline primarily to be concerned with what the early twentieth-century literary critic Bliss Perry called our “citizen literature” (Perry 1912, 43–44). American political science entailed serious inquiry into the principles, themes, debates, achievements, and failures of the American political tradition principally through a close study of its foundational documents and the narrative recounting of major historical events related to the origins and development of American government and American political thought. To understand the American founding, of course, it also is essential to understand what came before it and influenced it: the constitutional history of England, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the classical and biblical authorities from whom the American Founders borrowed liberally.

So conceived, a political science education is at once a liberal arts education and an education in citizenship. It involves the study of classics, political philosophy, history, and the foundational primary sources of American politics, taught with the public-spirited purpose of educating for citizenship in a constitutional democracy. Since the founding of the University of Virginia (UVA), state universities often have made the public purpose of educating citizens an explicit and paramount goal of higher education. In 1825, for example, the Board of Visitors at UVA recommended the following:

[A]s to the general principles of liberty and the rights of man, in nature and in society, the doctrines of *Locke in his Essay concerning the true extent and end of Civil Government*, and of *Sidney in his Discourse on Government* may be considered as those generally approved by our fellow citizens of this, and the United States, and that on the distinctive principles of the government of our State and those of the United States, the best guides are to be found in (1) the *Declaration of Independence*, as the fundamental act of union of these states, (2) the book known by the title of *The Federalist*,

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being an authority to which appeal is habitually made by all, and rarely declined or denied by any as evidence of the general opinion of those who framed, and those who accepted the Constitution of the United States, on questions as to its genuine meaning, (3) the *Resolutions of the General Assembly of Virginia* in 1799 on the subject of the alien and sedition laws, which appear to accord with the predominant sense of the people of the United States, (4) the valedictory address of President Washington, as conveying lessons of peculiar value; and that in the branch of the School of Law, which is to treat on the subject of Civil Polity, these shall be used as the text and documents of the school (Crick 1959, 14–15).

The Board of Visitors at UVA laid out a standard-model political science curriculum. Although the texts proposed for study at UVA weighed heavily in favor of the Virginia founders, many state universities followed this model and required by law the

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teaching of courses on American history and constitutionalism. My home state of Missouri, for example, still requires that “regular courses of instruction in the Constitution of the United States and of the state of Missouri and American history and institutions” are “given in all public and private schools in the state of Missouri” and “shall continue in college and university courses” (Missouri Revised Statutes 170.011.1).

The cause of civic education has long been popular in the United States, no doubt spurred by our republican principles and sense of American exceptionalism. In the late nineteenth century, Lord Acton observed, “[I]t is in political science only that America occupies the first rank” (Acton 1889, 391). “Political science” here meant the practical achievements of American politics guided by the wisdom and insights of philosophy and history. Of the foremost political scientists in America, Acton commented, “Five of these were secretaries of state, and one was secretary of the treasury” (Acton 1889, 391). Above all, the “science of politics” at the American founding and well into the nineteenth century was a practical discipline, numbering among its real-world accomplishments the creation and maintenance of liberal constitutional government through the prudent arrangement of power, predicated on a realistic assessment of human ambition and avarice, as well as the wise cultivation of civic virtue. The chief social and cultural failures of the founding generation, of course, were slavery and racism, the legacies of which still haunt us today and to which gravesites and battlefields of the US Civil War stand as a tragic memorial. However, this great failure presents a historical and theoretical case study that sharpens our inquiry into both the strength and practical limitations of the Founders’ “science of politics.”

The study of political science, in this older sense, requires careful analysis of the writings and documents produced by the first generation of American statesmen—especially the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the *Federalist*—together with the speeches and papers of Abraham Lincoln and

his interlocutors leading up to and during the Civil War, which represents a type of second American founding. Yet, this is merely the beginning. To study US politics in this way is to be invited into a conversation that then moves from the Civil War into Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, Progressive Era, New Deal, twentieth-century Civil Rights movement, Cold War, and beyond. The writings and speeches of Woodrow Wilson, Emma Goldman, John Dewey, Betty Friedan, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barry Goldwater—among many other important voices—expand this conversation into new terrain and contribute something distinct to our understanding of America’s political and constitutional development.

In recent years, for example, the work of second- and third-wave feminists, critical race scholars, environmentalists, and gender theorists has had a profound impact on modern discourse and political culture. Some of these voices operate on the level of

critical engagement with or even rejection of the Founders’ principles and ideas, whereas others are framed as developments and extensions of those same principles and ideas. Each voice highlights continuities and disjunctions in the tradition of American political thought and underscores the importance of the founding for what came after it. Scholars of American political thought are studying the contours of a dynamic and contentious conversation that cannot be understood in isolation. The American founding is crucial to understanding later developments and debates in US politics, just as earlier parts of a dinner conversation are essential for understanding the comments and references later in the evening. Of course, our civic conversation is still ongoing and the canon is far from closed—we are both participants in and scholars of that conversation. We can and should have rigorous debates about which voices have most shaped our politics and culture and which have been unduly neglected or valorized—all conducted with scholarly rigor in an effort to better understand the American political tradition.

The sort of inquiry described here is distinct from but complemented and reinforced by the study of US political history. In our current disciplinary parlance, we label this field of study as the specialized subfield of “American Political Thought,” which is distinct from quantitative or behavioral political science, on the one hand, and political philosophy on the other. These distinctions among American political thought, political science, and political philosophy are of a rather recent vintage. When Francis Lieber was appointed as the first professor of history and political science at Columbia College in 1857, he spoke eloquently in his inaugural address about the need for universities to fulfill the national purpose of cultivating a “candid and intelligent public spirit” and ensuring “the difficult existence of liberty” through the inculcation of enlightened patriotism (Lieber 1858, 37–8). “Moderns,” Lieber contended, “stand in need of nations and of national longevity, for their literatures and law, their industry, liberty, and patriotism; we want countries to work and write and

glow for, to live and to die for” (Lieber 1858, 10). Political science, for Lieber, was a citizen-forming endeavor, and there was no separation of political science from history, ethics, or law.

Indeed, political science was a self-consciously interdisciplinary, normative, and practical discipline at its inception. When Columbia College created the first School of Political Science in 1880, the school’s founding document declared its aim “to give a complete and general view of all the subjects of public polity, both internal and external, from the threefold point of view of history, law and philosophy.” This was to be undertaken chiefly to

more scientific political science, Crick explained, passed “quickly over the massive example of De Tocqueville, much of the work of Wilson and Bryce—indeed, of Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson and Lieber, too, and went questing after a science more pure” (Crick 1959, 100). Henceforth, political science would focus on what was quantifiable and testable and “it began to stress more and more statistical techniques of ensuring complete objectivity” (Crick 1959, 102). After World War II, especially, social scientists focused their studies on phenomena that could be observed, verified, and quantified; this meant that even the metaphysical abstraction of

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“fit young men for all the political branches of the public service” and to refine the training of journalists, lawyers, and educators. To these ends, the School of Political Science would embrace “courses in constitutional history and constitutional law, history of political theories, political economy and social science, Roman law and comparative jurisprudence, administrative law, international law, and history” (Columbia College 1893, 30.)

When the American Political Science Association (APSA) was founded at the turn of the century, however, the discipline assumed an even more explicit and conscious public purpose in service not of republican citizenship but rather of the State (understood in light of the Hegelian philosophy in vogue among the first generation of largely German-educated professional political scientists). “Political Science,” inaugural APSA President Frank Goodnow declared in the first issue of the *American Political Science Review*, “is that science which treats of the organization known as the State” and the practical purpose of political science is “the realization of the State will” (Goodnow 1904, 37).

An important shift occurs as we move from the “science of politics” of the American Founders to Lieber’s citizenship education to the organization of the APSA. Farr noted that during the

...period roughly from the debates over the ratification of the Constitution in 1787–1788 to the creation of the American Political Science Association in 1903 we witness a transformation in the most fundamental understanding of the nature and purposes of political science. It undergoes a metamorphosis from a popular, pre-professional discourse in the service of republican principles to an institutionalized, academic discipline attentive to the expansion of the administrative state (Farr 1990, 1028).

Political theory and constitutional law still formed the thematic core of the field of political science in 1903, but already skepticism about eternal verities and commitment to service of the modern bureaucratic state apparatus portend both thematic and methodological trends that would develop in the next century.

Political science followed a twentieth-century trajectory common among the social sciences: the discipline became organized as a learned discipline and then aspired to the status of a true science modeled after the hard sciences. The early progenitors of a

“the State” soon dropped out as the subject of scientific inquiry. Political scientists instead focused their studies on measurements of individual behavior—dollars spent, votes cast, opinions expressed—rather than traditional-but-hard-to-quantify subjects such as laws, institutions, and ideas.

In their reflection on the discipline, Somit and Tanenhaus (1967, 189) observed that “behavioralism posed a threat not only to the predominance of traditional political science but conceivably to its very survival.” Implicit in the behaviorist revolution was scorn for the old legalistic, historical, and theoretical political science as outside the purview of legitimate scientific inquiry. Historical development, constitutionalism, and political thought would be relegated to the humanistic disciplines of history, law, philosophy, or even theology; political science, as a social science, henceforth would focus on what could be independently measured and tested. “‘Traditional’ political scientists not only studied the wrong things,” Farr noted, “...they did so in the wrong way, whether by prescribing what it was to be a good citizen or a just state, or by ‘textual exegesis of the classics as if they were sacred writings’” (Farr 1995, 204; inner quotation from Eulau 1963, 8).

The traditionalists retaliated, of course. “Only a great fool would call the new political science diabolical...” Strauss (1968, 223) famously wrote. “Nevertheless, one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns.” Behaviorists, meanwhile, insisted that the scholars who studied ideas and institutions were the real fiddlers, engaged in abstract speculations that were neither empirical nor verifiable. In the intervening years, political scientists have engaged in many interdisciplinary debates about methodology, and we have seen the flowering of postbehavioralism and neoinstitutionalism as well as the rugged persistence and even renaissance of political history and political philosophy.

Some of these recent developments are exemplified by the Perestroika movement in political science that started in the early 2000s. The aim of that movement was a move toward methodological pluralism and practical relevance, and it leveled a broad challenge to the APSA leadership and the editors of its flagship journal, the *American Political Science Review* (Monroe 2005). Schram and Caterino’s edited volume *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method* (2005) brings

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together many of the different voices in this movement. The goal of their book was to promote “the type of knowledge Aristotle called *phronesis*,” which is gained through an “intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of various forms of social practice embedded in complex social settings” and cannot be captured simply by quantitative methods modeled after the hard sciences (Schram and Caterino 2005, 8).

The following year, Dryzek (2006, 487) insisted that “Minerva’s owl [had] yet to take flight over Perestroika”; therefore, he considered it premature to state whether political science would

working in American universities. This brings up an important question about the relationship between political theory and American political thought. In the Aristotelian tradition, political science is an all-encompassing analysis of political phenomena in which both empirical and normative approaches have a place. Normative political theory is a systematic inquiry into the best political regime, which involves rigorous analysis of human nature, justice, and the good. American political thought, however, is not simply political theory. Rather, it is the study of how the questions posed by political theory historically have been answered by

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undergo a lasting and fundamental methodological reorientation because of this movement. Still, by then, the movement was gaining traction and some disciplinary respect. Now, 16 years since the beginning of the Perestroika movement, we have seen a strong trend toward methodological pluralism in political science, which has created space for historical, theoretical, and qualitative modes of inquiry. Within this context, American political development and American political thought have recently emerged as recognized disciplinary subfields that privilege historical and theoretical approaches to the study of politics.

Political scientists today are united by a shared object of inquiry rather than a shared method of inquiry. Yet, it is also true that we often single out political philosophy as somehow in opposition to or in tension with political science proper. In his early reflections on these questions, Lutz (1994, 17) noted in contrast that “in Aristotle’s conceptualization, empirical political science is part of the total analysis encompassed by political philosophy, rather than being in opposition to it.” In other words, the traditional approach to political science, which developed from the Aristotelian tradition, is not anti-empirical. The ostensible tension between empirical political science and political philosophy today is one that few people would have contemplated before the methodological trends of the twentieth century, which were themselves the products of debates within the philosophy of knowledge.

When Lutz surveyed the professional landscape in the early 1990s, he concluded that “American political theory is not yet a discipline.” By “discipline,” he meant a “specific, rigorous intellectual formation” in a particular field of study, where scholars are united by systematic inquiry, logical exposition, and peer-reviewed evaluation (Lutz 1994, 5). What Lutz called American political theory—and what we are now calling American political thought—was, instead, a discipline “waiting to be born” (Lutz 1994, 1). At the moment, however, American political thought existed as a vestige of the old political science—something that was done tangentially by scholars in other subfields (e.g., public law and legislative studies) but did not constitute a distinct discipline in its own right.

Of course, even when American political thought was not yet a discipline, scholars working in the United States continued to produce some of the twentieth century’s most influential works of political theory. Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, John Rawls, and others made significant contributions to political theory while

actors in the American polity and the way that those answers have contributed to the development of political institutions, culture, and practices in the United States. In this way, American political thought is a discipline distinct from but informed by political theory.

Lutz helpfully drew out this distinction between political theory and American political thought by focusing on the nature of public political texts in our constitutional tradition. By definition, he wrote, those texts “aim at a broad public, a readership composed of the general citizenry, rather than at a relative few people who are skilled at careful reading” (Lutz 1994, 31). The primary purpose of these documents is to “summarize, encapsulate, codify, interpret, reinterpret, modify, extend, or merely celebrate ideas and concepts that are already generally understood and accepted by most citizens.” For that reason, the documents tell us something about the regime in which they are produced and the citizens for whom they are written, and they are a window into a larger political and constitutional tradition. Scholars often read the great works of political theory, by contrast, *not* with an eye toward what those texts tell us about the culture and the people who produced them but rather for how those texts address enduring political questions. Stated another way, scholars of American political thought should not read *The Federalist* in the same way political theorists read Locke and Montesquieu, but they should read Locke and Montesquieu in order to understand *The Federalist*.

When I started out as a political scientist, I was still blissfully unaware of most of these methodological and disciplinary disputes. I studied political thought and constitutionalism because that is what interested me. I am methodologically with the traditionalists, but only because my own interests pull me toward subjects that are less amenable to quantitative analysis. Suggesting, as Strauss did, that quantitative political scientists fiddle while Rome burns seems to me something of a stretch. Traditionalists should frankly acknowledge that there are many interesting political questions that can be addressed insightfully with quantitative methodology and that these methods can enlarge our inquiry into American political thought. One of my department colleagues, for example, has written a book on the historical development of the single-member district electoral system in the US House of Representatives (Dow 2017). The question should drive the method, and this question is perfectly fitted for historical, theoretical, and empirical inquiry. There need not be methodological hegemony; a plurality of methods can enlarge rather than narrow the field of play.

The real question is whether scholars who engage in historical, interpretative, and theoretical investigation have a seat at the table, and whether the Founders' "science of politics" still has a place in twenty-first-century higher education.

What threatens the traditional science of politics is not quantitative social science (which has always been part of political science) but rather scientism. It is one thing to claim that quantitative methods can yield insights into political phenomena; Aristotle would have agreed. It is quite another to claim that *only* quantitative methods can yield insights into political phenomena. The latter claim rests on the philosophical premise that we can have genuine factual knowledge only about things that can be observed, quantified, and tested. Yet this self-refuting claim is not subject to observation, quantification, and testing: it is rather bad philosophy masquerading as the foundation of good social science. When taken to its logical conclusion, scientism does two things to social science: it screens from view the very questions that lead us to study politics in the first place, and it substitutes quantitative abstractions for the real political phenomena. I am reminded of a sociologist in C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* (1943, 57), of whom the narrator observes: "Statistics about agricultural labourers were the substance; any real ditcher, ploughman, or farmer's boy, was the shadow." A social science rooted in scientism threatens traditional subjects and categories but also makes itself irrelevant.

Political science remains practically relevant, among other things, as an avenue for citizen formation and a vehicle for liberal arts education. Educating for citizenship is a vital endeavor for the maintenance of constitutional democracy, and it has long been connected to the purpose of higher education. Indeed, the project of preserving constitutional government was at the heart of the Founders' vision for higher education, and it should remain part of ours as well (Thomas 2014). Yet, in the specialized world of higher education today—and especially among research institutions—any subfield that aspires to professional respect must develop a place in the organized discipline as well as an outlet and agenda for its scholarship. There are practical demands that strategically must be met, and many people have been diligent in doing the yeoman's labor of building programs and curricula, raising money, and creating the professional networks necessary to allow the discipline to thrive in the twenty-first-century academy. In recent years, a number of constitutional-studies programs have developed across the country, including University of Missouri's Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy, UVA's Program on Constitutionalism and Democracy, University of Notre Dame's Potenziani Program in Constitutional Studies, and University of Wisconsin's American Democracy Forum. The launching of the peer-reviewed journals *American Political Thought* and *Constitutional Studies* and the recent creation of an APSA organized section devoted to American

political thought stand as additional evidence that the old "science of politics" is making a comeback and winning a seat at the table in the modern academy—a good thing for both the future of American political thought and (it is hoped) the future of political thought in America.

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