

The Slow Graying of Our Professoriate

John C. Lane

State University of New York at Buffalo

The prospects for academic employment of political scientists have been much discussed, in the pages of *PS* and elsewhere. These discussions have focused mainly on the coming decline in the undergraduate and graduate populations, the hopes of attracting new student clienteles, the worsening budgets of colleges and universities, and the possibilities of non-academic employment for political scientists.

However, little attention has been given to the prospects of academic employment which might become available directly as a consequence of retirements by political scientists who currently occupy positions in academia. Thus, in analyzing the placement of new Ph.D.s in 1978, Thomas E. Mann noted in passing that "as a relatively young profession, political science will not have a significant number of retirements until the mid-1990s."¹ Just how youthful is our profession? How significant is the number of retirements likely to be in the coming years? And what employment prospects should result?

Young Profession

The data examined here were drawn from the 1980 issue of the *The Guide to Graduate Study in Political Science*,

which provides information on the institutional affiliations, academic degrees and professorial ranks for over 4,500 political scientists at nearly 300 institutions that grant graduate degrees in the United States.² Table I shows the years in which they received their Ph.D. degrees and the academic ranks they occupied in 1980. Although they constitute only about half of the political scientists employed by academic institutions, it is reasonable to assume that those attributes which are relevant to this study are essentially similar for persons who are employed exclusively in undergraduate institutions.³

Table I illustrates quite clearly that the preponderance—indeed, more than two-thirds—of political scientists in academic positions obtained their Ph.D. degrees in the past two decades. (What Table I suggests about other matters, such as the tenuring-in of political scientists or the recent decline in hiring of new Ph.D.s, is beyond the scope of this short inquiry.)

If we assume that the Ph.D. degree is acquired, on an average, at the age of thirty (a presumably reasonable assumption)⁴ then we arrive at an

²Jean Walen, *Guide to Graduate Study in Political Science 1980* (Washington, D.C.: 1980).

³The attributes being average age at receipt of the Ph.D., the timing of retirement and the numbers in each group. On the roughly equal distribution of Ph.D.s between graduate-level and undergraduate institutions, see the tabulations in "Political Science Faculty and Student Data," *PS*, Summer 1979, p. 334.

⁴The *Guide to Graduate Study* has no data on the age of faculty members. A small random sample of Ph.D.s listed in the latest (1973) APSA Biographical Directory indicates a median age of 30 and an average age of slightly above 30 at the time the Ph.D. was received.

¹Thomas E. Mann, "Placement of Political Scientists in 1977," *PS*, Winter 1978, p. 26.

TABLE 1
Ph.D.s Employed at 272 Political Science Departments,
by Year of Receipt of the Ph.D. Degree and by Academic Rank^a

Year of Receipt of Ph.D. Degree	Academic Ranks				Totals	%
	Full Professor	Associate Professor	Assistant Professor	Other ^b		
1921-1945	72	2	2	6	82	1.87
1946-1950	167	8	1	1	177	4.04
1951-1955	295	16	1	1	313	7.15
1956-1960	344	35	4	5	388	8.87
1961-1965	447	131	10	6	594	13.57
1966-1970	351	465	52	31	899	20.54
1971-1975	59	449	430	51	989	22.60
1976-1980	1	16	459	48	524	11.97
Ph.D. Candidate	0	1	77	4	82	1.87
Not Ascertained ^c	102	74	110	42	328	7.50
Totals	1,838	1,179	1,146	195	4,376	99.98

^aThe figures include 71 persons with other terminal degrees, such as D.P.A. or J.D. They do not include 14 B.A.s nor 167 M.A.s, a substantial number of whom are likely to be Ph.D. candidates.

^b"Other" includes 107 persons for whom no academic rank was indicated or ascertainable, and 88 visiting or adjunct appointments. Emeriti professors were *not* included.

^cFor 328 persons, the year in which they received their Ph.D. degree was not provided and could not be ascertained from other biographical reference works.

estimated age distribution of the professoriate that is shown in Table 2. There are some striking features that should be noted in those data:

- About half of the political science professoriate is currently between the ages of 35 and 45;
- close to 40 percent are below the age of 40;
- some three-quarters of the total are below the age of 50; and
- fewer than 10 percent are currently at the age of 60 or older.

Clearly, we are a remarkably young profession.

Job Prospects

The implications of these figures for future employment prospects in academic institutions are worrisome for any new Ph.D.s, although, as we shall note shortly, by no means clear-cut. We have assumed that political scientists acquire the Ph.D. degree at an average age of 30. If we assume, further, that they will retire from academic positions at the age of 65, then the pattern of retirement

picture in Figure 1 results. It is obviously a pattern which gives little comfort to new Ph.D.s who aspire to positions vacated by retiring academics in political science departments—particularly if we look at the next two decades.

How confident can we be about the assumption regarding retirement age? Predicting future decisions about the timing of retirements is inevitably fraught with uncertainties. There are, on the one hand, indications that academics tended to retire progressively earlier in recent years; yet a majority of them still retire only after they reach the age of sixty-four.⁶ There may also emerge institutional pressure of inducements to encourage early retirements, and "premature" (involuntary) retirements through modifications of the tenure

⁶Report of the Special Committee on Age Discrimination and Retirement, "The Impact of Federal Retirement-Age Legislation on Higher Education," *AAUP Bulletin*, September 1978, p. 182.

system.⁶ On the other hand, there are factors which could work in the direction of delayed retirements, such as the impact of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, and the emphasis on protecting seniority on the part of collective bargaining agents. Furthermore, the recent trend toward earlier retirements may well be slowed by the erosion of, or limitations on, benefits provided by annuities and Social Security.⁷

On balance, then, it would seem that assuming an average retirement age of 65, preceded by 35 years in academic positions, is reasonable. If true, then we are confronted with some troubling projections:

- More than half of the political scientists currently in academic positions will not reach retirement age in this century;
- in the 1980s only about 600 of those in graduate departments—and probably a similar number in undergraduate departments—can be expected to retire; consequently,
- the number of retirement-created vacancies in this decade will amount to about 120 positions annually, a number vastly fewer than the number of Ph.D. degrees awarded annually in recent years;
- only around the turn of the century will the number of retirees increase substantially, and if their places are taken by brand-new Ph.D.s, it would be persons who currently have not yet reached high school age; and
- these estimates are based on the fragile assumption that each academic position vacated by a retirement will actually be filled by a new appointment.

⁶On institutional strategies, *ibid.*, pp. 187-191.

⁷See, for instance, "Professors Plan to Delay Retirement When New Law is Applied to Them," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 15, 1980, p. 12.

TABLE 2
Estimated Age Distribution of Political Scientists Employed at 272 Departments, in 1980

Estimated Age	Number	% of Total
65 and over	89	2.07
60-64	192	4.47
55-59	339	7.89
50-54	420	9.78
45-49	643	14.97
40-44	973	22.66
35-39	1,071	24.94
30-34	567	13.20
Totals	4,294	99.98

The 328 Ph.D.s for whom the year of the receipt of the Ph.D. could not be ascertained [see Table 1] have in this table been allocated proportionally to each of the eight age groups. The 82 Ph.D. candidates have been omitted.

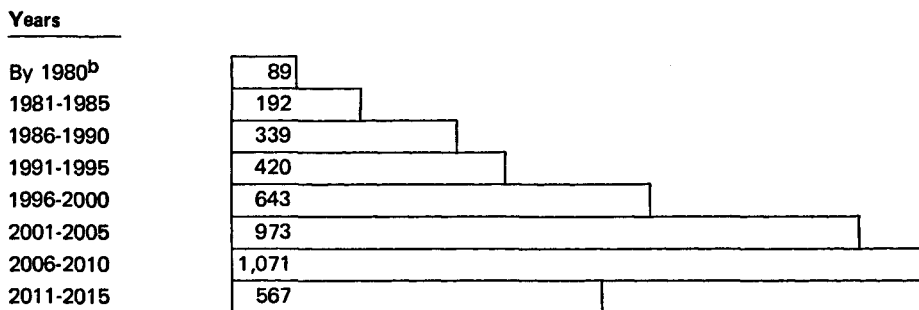
Painful Costs

The conclusion seems inescapable that during the next two decades, at least, the employment demands of new Ph.D.s in political science can be met only very marginally by academic positions opened through retirements. The prospect of entering the political science professoriate could, of course, be brightened if there are such developments as a steep decline in the number of new Ph.D.s;⁸ or an accelerated rate of migration and placement into non-academic positions;⁹

⁸"In the late 1970s," reports Sheila Mann, "the decline in the supply of political scientists has levelled off." The number of new Ph.D.s stood at 851 for the academic year 1977/78, down from a peak of 911 in 1970/71. See Sheila K. Mann, "Placement of Political Scientists, 1978-79," *PS*, Winter 1980, p. 10.

⁹Jack L. Walker has written that "at present 2 percent (150-170) persons of the political science faculty are leaving their positions each year to take permanent non-academic jobs." Walker, "Challenges of Professional Development for Political Science in the Next Decade and Beyond," *PS*, Fall 1978, p. 488. On opportunities and problems of increasing migration of political science Ph.D.s into non-academic positions, see Erwin C. Hargrove,

FIGURE 1
Estimated Retirement Years for Political Scientists
at 272 Political Science Departments in 1980^a



^aThe note appended to Table 2 also applies to this figure.

^bThis group of 89 persons can be assumed to have obtained their Ph.D. degrees at ages well below the average of 30, or to be postponing their retirements beyond the age of 65, or both.

or modifications of the tenure system. Yet even with such developments (and assuming no growth in the number of academic positions), we need to recognize that the slow turnover in the political science professoriate will be a significant factor in limiting employment opportunities in the coming decades. The costs—human, collegial, institutional—of the slow graying of our professoriate loom as considerable and painful ones. ■

Why Political Economy?

Stephen L. Elkin

University of Maryland

Editor's Note: Formed in 1977, the ranks of the Conference Group on the Political Economy of Advanced Industrial Societies have swelled. As organizer of the 1981 panels of the Conference Group (held in conjunction with the APSA Annual

Meeting in September), Stephen Elkin was asked to write the following article for PS to explain why the group formed, what its scholars study, and how this perspective differs from that of other subfields in political science.

The Conference Group on the Political Economy of Advanced Industrial Societies is a loose association of scholars concerned with expanding the focus of political studies to take account of the interrelations between economic and political activity. The group was formed in 1977 and its principal activity has been to present a series of panels held simultaneously with the American Political Science Association meetings. The mailing list of the group now numbers over 400. During its existence it has presented some 60 panels, several of which have been among the best attended at the annual meetings.

Formation of the group was prompted by an uneasiness among Conference Group participants with a central assumption underlying much of the post-war study of the politics of advanced industrial societies. Specifically, much of this work assumes that there are two separable realms, broadly, economy and polity. Although for centrally planned societies the idea of such a separation is not

“Can Political Science Develop Alternative Careers for its Graduates?”, *PS*, Fall 1979, pp. 446-450.