

# Whither Political Science in a Post-Pandemic World? Challenges, Trends, and Opportunities

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In this essay I outline what I see as the challenges, trends and opportunities facing political science after the pandemic. In particular, the essay focuses on the importance of political science education in addressing the challenges to democracy we now face, and the need to rethink political science education at all levels, k-12, undergraduate and graduate education. It ends with a description of the presidential task force on “Rethinking Political Science Education” and the establishment of an APSA standing committee on civic education.

In this essay, I outline what I see as the challenges, trends, and opportunities facing political science after the pandemic. I focus both on the importance of political science education in addressing the challenges to democracy we now face and the need to rethink political science education at all levels: K–12, undergraduate, and graduate. This essay ends with a description of the presidential task force, “Rethinking Political Science Education,” and the newly established APSA standing committee on civic education.

Let me begin by thanking all of you for this opportunity to have served as president of the APSA. It has been a great honor to serve the profession I love. However, I would like to start with a disclaimer. I am not sure I can really answer the question posed in the title of my talk: Whither political science in a new post-pandemic world? What I can discuss are the challenges, trends, and opportunities facing our discipline. But even then, I do not believe I can speak about the entirety of the discipline—that would be entirely too much—and I am not all-seeing or all-knowing (although our 18-month-old grandson still thinks so).

In my presidency, I established two task forces that reflect my vision about our association’s potential to transform politics and political science:


- Promoting Responsible Party Behavior (cochaired by David Lublin, American University, and Liliana Mason, Johns Hopkins University, and supported by the work of Jennifer Dresden at the Protect Democracy organization)
- Rethinking Political Science Education (cochaired by Michelle Deardorff of the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga and David Lake, University of California San Diego, and former APSA president)

In this essay I focus on the second task force, on teaching, because no APSA presidential address in recent memory has focused on teaching and learning. So, in precedent-breaking times caused by a pandemic, it seems appropriate to present something different this year.

Let me first share my career trajectory, inasmuch as my experiences in the discipline have shaped how I see things in our field. I have had the opportunity to teach at several very different institutions. In addition to being an adjunct instructor at Central Michigan University and at community colleges, for the first 18 years of my career I taught at a primarily teaching institution (Truman State University in Missouri), which is classified as a “public liberal arts” university. Class sizes were small (usually fewer than 30 students), and I taught three or four classes a semester. There was no graduate program in political science. The focus at Truman was on teaching; research and scholarship were considered of secondary importance.

Since 2008, I have taught at the University of North Texas, a large research-intensive university where my teaching experiences are radically different than at Truman. Most of my classes these days are graduate-level classes, including scope and methods, introductory pre-seminars, and several advanced seminars on comparative

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doi:10.1017/S1537592723000099

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politics, where I supervise many PhD dissertations (although like all of us in Texas, I teach introductory classes in American and Texas politics). Thus, I have had a variety of different experiences in very different academic environments.

In addition, I was editor in chief of the *Journal of Political Science Education* (2003–12) and of the *American Political Science Review* (2012–16). More recently I served as APSA president-elect (2020), president (2021–22), and immediate past president (2022 to present). Given these experiences, I believe I am well positioned to provide some insight into the development of political science as a discipline.

In this essay, I address four topics:

- Challenges and opportunities facing our discipline in the wake of the COVID pandemic
- General trends in our discipline
- The need to refocus on teaching and learning
- Recommendations for restructuring political science education

## Challenges and Opportunities

Our discipline faces many challenges. Since 2020, social unrest and a global pandemic have wreaked havoc across the globe. Times like these cause us to rethink almost everything about our discipline—how we run our conferences, how we interact as colleagues, how we influence policy makers, how we publish and make our research consumable to a broader public, and, perhaps most importantly, how we teach.

At the same time, we are facing a number of existential questions, such as what is political science for, and why should the discipline be supported. These questions come not only from politicians and policy makers who question our right to exist as a field but also from parents and guardians who wonder what we as a discipline can offer their children that will enhance their career prospects.

However, the pandemic and the social upheaval that it caused also created opportunities for change. These times forced us to reconsider many of our campus practices that we had taken for granted. In many cases it propelled us to confront long-standing issues that were long ignored. Although it will be challenging, it is time to confront the existential questions that face us.

## Trends

Political science has evolved considerably over my last 34 years in the discipline. Here are some trends I see occurring.

First, there is a growing internationalization of the field, as well as a growing questioning of current subdisciplinary divisions. These subdisciplinary boundaries were formed in an earlier part of the twentieth century and are becoming increasingly irrelevant (Jaschik 2010). Many scholars

are questioning American politics as a field of study and are calling for its rebirth as part of comparative politics. For instance, Mary Hawkesworth (quoted in Jaschik 2008), argued that, when the United States is studied in isolation, “certain things get masked.” I do not think that this means the abolition of American politics as a field, but rather that we should begin to study American politics in context, from a comparative perspective. There is also much that scholars researching politics in countries across the globe can learn from studying American politics.

In addition, there has been a decline in the study of international conflicts and a general move toward understanding intrastate conflicts and civil wars (notwithstanding the current Ukrainian war, which many forget began as a civil war). Indeed, globally, the absolute number of deaths by international wars *has been declining* since 1946. However, conflicts involving nonstate actors such as political militias, criminal gangs, and international terrorist groups are on the rise. Ethnically based conflicts, the breakdown in the rule of law, and climate change are also increasingly important factors explaining intrastate conflict. As a result, there are now greater connections being developed between international relations and comparative politics scholars. There is also a growing realization among scholars that the wall dividing domestic and international politics is rapidly eroding. International dynamics affect internal politics, particularly in this era of globalization, and domestic politics strongly influences the international political behavior of states (a point long made by scholars of foreign policy).

Another area that transcends traditional subdisciplinary boundaries is immigration. Some scholars have studied how immigrants carry with them the experiences from their countries of origins, which include experiences with autocracy or conflict (Wals 2011). An entirely new literature has emerged that connects comparative politics and American politics.

A second major trend in the discipline is a move away from the dominant Straussian approaches in the study of political theory, which emphasize the ancient Greek philosophers (such as Plato and Aristotle) as the only important contributors to modern theory. Both contemporary political theory and non-Western comparative political theory are increasingly being studied. For instance, there has been a rebirth in the study of American political theorists such as Abraham Lincoln, as well as the anti-modernism of thinkers such as Martin Heidegger. There is also a greater emphasis on applied and critical theoretical approaches.

Third, there has been a growing unity of methodological approaches, based on the idea that formal modeling, normative theory, and quantitative and qualitative empirical approaches can be fruitfully combined. There is a greater embrace of “mixed methodology” (in contrast to the methods wars of the 1990s) that combines quantitative

and qualitative approaches in new and exciting ways (Gerring 2012). This acceptance and promotion of methodological pluralism are exemplified by the recent APSA presidential address by Janet Box-Steffensmeier (2022). This is a very positive development, enabling us to explore all the tools in the research toolbox.

There has also been a shift in what we study as political scientists. A very notable development is the growing importance of diversity, race, and ethnicity and the impact of an increasingly multicultural West on democracy. This is particularly true in both the United States and Europe. There is also growing awareness of the “backlash” effect, marked by the rise of anti-immigrant and racist populist movements. This is likely to expand as a topic of inquiry for political scientists.

The fourth trend is perhaps the most significant one: the growing importance of the need to study teaching and student learning. Where support from political leaders for basic research in political science has waned, support for improved teaching has increased. Political science teaches important skills that help promote leadership in a variety of ways. Our students learn (or should learn) how to diagnose and analyze a problem and how to come up with plans, based on evidence, to effectively solve problems. They learn how to mobilize support for their initiatives and actions and, most importantly, how to apply ethical insights to guide the use of power to achieve desired ends. These skills are needed now at all levels of society—not just in government but also in the private sector, the nonprofit sector, and in civil society. Thus, rethinking the teaching of political science at the undergraduate and graduate levels, especially how we structure and organize our educational programs, is needed now more than ever.

## Why We Need to Restructure Our Educational Programs

This restructuring is essential for several reasons.

- There is a great need to re-engage citizens in the democratic process.
- We are in a new world of technology where we are only beginning to understand what works and what does not in online pedagogy.
- In this era of widespread public support for assessment and accountability in higher education, we need to do a much better job of showing how what we do in the classroom actually leads to student learning.
- Focusing on teaching and learning is also simply what we are supposed to do: we are both teachers and scholars.

Thus, rethinking the teaching of political science at the undergraduate and graduate levels—and especially how we structure and organize our educational programs—is

needed now more than ever. Are our programs structured in the most effective way to impart these skills? As we rethink what we do, we must be cognizant of the challenges we face.

First, political science enrollments have declined, and the types of institutions that students attend have changed. Data from the National Council on Educational Statistics (2022) show that the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in political science has declined significantly from about 40,000 per year in 2011–12 to about 34,000 per year in 2018–19. Currently only 1.77% of all bachelor’s degrees awarded are in political science—the lowest level ever recorded. Another set of data (APSA 2018) show that enrollments have flattened and even recovered slightly. There has also been a reallocation of students: a larger proportion of students now attend very large state institutions (with very large class sizes) or two-year community and junior colleges (although the pandemic has affected that as well). In addition, an increasing number of students are enrolling in online or hybrid programs, rather than in traditional brick-and-mortar locations.

The demographics of the student population are changing and, more importantly, what they ask of us is also changing. As McClellan (2015) notes, current undergraduate curricular models in political science assume that the typical student is 18- to 24-years-old and attends university full time. However, higher education enrollment is changing dramatically. The student body is becoming more ethnically diverse, predominantly female, and less likely to comprise 18- year-olds fresh out of high school. By 2025 there will be 11.3 million female college students compared to 8.4 million males (NCES 2022). Moreover, it is estimated that African American enrollment will increase by 25% and Hispanic/Latino enrollment by 34% this decade. There will also be significantly more older students, with increases expected in both the 25–34 and the 35-and-over cohorts by 2025, as well as increases in the number of first-generation college and nontraditional students. Many curricular models were based on designing a political science major for a large cohort of majority White middle-class young people in a full-time residential setting, but this is no longer the case.

These new students are asking us what our major can do for them in terms of their career aspirations. There is also increasing demand from various stakeholders in higher education for a greater emphasis on teaching employable skills at the undergraduate level. Although this has been accompanied by some emphasis on practical skills (and STEM fields), the importance of skills traditionally associated with a liberal arts education has also been recognized. For instance, a task force of college career services and HR/staffing professionals of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE 2018) is calling for “career-readiness” preparation. It recommended that undergraduate majors develop the competencies that

employers associate with job readiness: critical thinking, communication skills, global/intercultural fluency, digital technology and information literacy, professionalism/work ethic, and leadership and teamwork. Although political science has emphasized some of these competencies, others are largely missing from many programs. It is likely that incoming students will demand the development of skills beyond the traditional ones typically emphasized in political science programs.

There is also the realization, reinforced by current events, that there needs to be greater emphasis on promoting the development of democratic citizenship. This involves promoting among students a sense of civic efficacy and tolerance of diversity, both pillars of a democratic citizenry. Thus, having civic and political engagement as a goal of the political science curriculum is critical, and the curriculum should enable exposure to multiple points of view and promote diverse ways of thinking about political engagement.

A major challenge to promoting greater political engagement, however, is the ignorance of many Americans of basic features of the political system. For instance, according to the 2017 Annenberg Public Policy Center's Constitution Day Civics Survey, more than one-third of Americans surveyed (37%) could not name any of the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment, only one-quarter (26%) could name all three branches of government, and fully one-third (33%) could not name any of the branches of the US government.

There is some reason for hope. Despite the challenges of declining enrollments, changes in the demographic composition of incoming students, and demands for the development of "employable skills" at the undergraduate level, there are new opportunities as well. The rise in mass political engagement—exemplified by the Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and March for Our Lives movements—suggests a rising interest in politics. The 2021 Annenberg study noted that the percentage of Americans who could not name any of the rights guaranteed in the First Amendment fell to 17%, the percentage who could name all three branches of government rose to 56%, and the percent who could not name any branch of government decreased to 20%. This renewed interest in politics was largely spurred by the "Trump effect" (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2021) and has been accompanied by a rediscovery of civic and political engagement as a goal of the political science curriculum. Colleges and universities now recognize the need for "quality civic education to foster the redevelopment of a knowledgeable, capable, and informed citizenry" (Matto et al. 2017, 3). This goal should be the focus of political science education in this new post-pandemic world.

Past APSA presidents have addressed these challenges, promoting important initiatives on civic engagement (Rogers Smith), greater equity and social justice in our discipline (Paula McClain), and alternative career paths

outside academia (Janet Box-Steffensmeier). There has been a reemphasis on teaching in the discipline, as shown by the establishment of the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference in 2004 and the elevation of the *Journal of Political Science Education* (JPSE) to an association-wide journal.

## How to Restructure Political Science Education

Yet, how we organize our majors, what we want our students to learn (in terms of content and skills), and how we know whether we are meeting those goals (assessment) have not received as much attention as our pedagogy. Indeed, there has not been a major APSA-sponsored curriculum reform of the undergraduate political science major since the 1991 publication of *Liberal Learning and the Political Science Major: A Report to the Profession* (referred to as the "Wahlke Report," after the committee chair John Wahlke). That report promoted a vision of liberal arts education and a political science major that emphasized the structure and sequencing of courses to better promote the acquisition of critical thinking and other important transferable skills—those skills and talents that go beyond what is learned in a degree program and are considered "life experiences." The Wahlke Report was a landmark in the history of the discipline and the APSA, providing association-wide guidance on the structure of the political science major. In my view, however, it is outdated. It is time for us to rethink the structure of the undergraduate major in political science.

Since 2019, an APSA grant-funded group of scholars has been working on a "new Wahlke Report." One of its first outcomes was a vision statement on the undergraduate major:

Political science aims at turning politically interested and concerned students, whatever their career plans or their other interests, into politically literate college graduates. It equips them to comprehend and engage with their political world after graduation in order to succeed in a wide variety of careers and professions in the public, nonprofit, and profit-making sectors. In addition, the political science major prepares students to become actively engaged citizens in their communities.

In September 2021, the APSA Council approved the creation of a presidential task force "Rethinking Political Science Education" to build on the efforts of that working group. The scope of the task force is much broader and more ambitious; it is rethinking political science education for undergraduate political science majors and for graduate programs including the PhD. Chaired by Michelle Dearing and David Lake, the task force is identifying critical skills and knowledge that students should know (so undergraduates learn these things, and graduate students can teach these things), rethinking what political science means, and focusing on how we structure our programs to realize these learning goals. A key part of this

project is promoting a discipline-wide discussion of what it is critical for political science students to know so they can gain knowledge and skills that not only are useful but that also prepare them to be engaged citizens in a democracy. Students need to learn about diversity and tolerance of many points of view, so as not to label the ones they don't agree with as traitorous. They need to understand that their country has made many mistakes and there has been much injustice, but that we are able to learn from those mistakes and correct them. Nor should they be spoon-fed a version of their history where nothing went wrong and everything was heroic. That is not a history for a democracy but a history autocrats try to create.

At its completion, the task force will provide a concrete set of recommendations on which we can build an action plan that will restructure educational programs to meet the challenges we face. In short, the work of this task force will be only a beginning, not an end.

In addition to the task force, the APSA council in December 2022 approved the formation of a standing K–12 civic education committee that will address how primary and secondary school students are being prepared for advanced placement (AP), dual-credit, and other college preparation courses. It originally was tasked with making recommendations to better integrate the high school, undergraduate, and graduate political science curriculum. However, after several meetings, it was determined that its focus should be on the undergraduate and graduate political science curricula, because APSA has had a longer history of engagement with curricular issues at these levels. Although civic education was a focus of the APSA at its inception, since the 1960s (unfortunately) the association has had very little to do with the K–12 civic education curriculum.

What is needed is a much more sustained effort, beyond a task force, to investigate how APSA can help coordinate efforts to promote civic education, democratic values, and pluralism and to suggest best practices in the development of civic education curricula. Such efforts require consistency and ongoing work by a committee, as well as support by APSA staff. The target audience of this new committee will be K–12/high school educators who are engaged in civic education efforts including, but not limited to, those involved in the development of AP classes in government and those who teach classes on civic education; national AP course guideline and policy makers; and existing K–12 civic education institutions.

This proposed committee will explore how APSA can assist in the development of civic education programs for K–12 students by doing the following:

- Outlining the current landscape of K–12 civic education activities, highlighting the organizations that are currently involved in promoting civic education and recommending ways that APSA might assist in their

activities, such as providing regular updates in APSA's magazine about initiatives like *Educating for Democracy*

- Summarizing existing research on civic education and making it “digestible” to practitioners, using emerging platforms such as *APSA Educate*, *Raise the Vote*, *Pre-Prints*, and *Cambridge Core*
- Developing a database(s) of resources that could be used by APSA members who are involved in K–12 civic education and in advanced placement courses
- Recommending, in consultation with organizations currently involved in the promotion of civic education, best practices regarding civic education curricula and AP guidelines

I end this essay on that note. We have come a long way over the past few years, but we have much left to do. We are at a transformative moment for our discipline in this new post-pandemic world. As APSA past president Janet Box-Steffensmeier's address in Seattle in 2021 emphasized, we must prepare our students at all levels for these challenges and for the “golden age” of political science. If we do so, we can change the trajectory of democracy in this country and in the world. I have great confidence in our discipline and believe that political science is up to that challenge.

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