

Political Science Needs More Viewpoint Diversity

Would academic political science benefit from more viewpoint diversity? Let's start with the good news, which is that political science isn't nearly the worst-off discipline on campus.

this one, of faculty members' voter registration data suggest that poli sci does not contain nearly as large a share of conservative and libertarian professors as the more intellectually diverse fields of economics and law. Democrats outnumber Republicans among political science professors by over 7 to 1.

Political science may contain no more diversity on this score than un-diverse fields such as comparative literature, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and social psychology. If poli sci is better than most, it's because the frameworks of thinking, research, and teaching that dominate it are, ironically, less politicized than in many other disciplines.

In fields like literature and anthropology, research agendas so thoroughly reflect liberal and progressive assumptions and interests that in many cases it is unclear how the occasional conservative can contribute to major debates. Political science contains some areas of study like this, driven by the left's beliefs about what topics are salient and how they should be studied.

Political science is also populated by large research agendas motivated by mainstream concerns. These focus, for example, on the causes of voting behavior, the outbreak of war and peace, and the broad contours of international political economy. These sorts of topics would play a central role even in a much

more intellectually diverse political science.

That still leaves a lot of room for improvement. Simply put, many topics that reflect conservative assumptions and interpretations go un-researched and un-taught because conservatives make up such a small share of faculties.

Let me provide two examples.

First, religion and politics have obviously interacted in profound ways for millennia. I say “obviously,” yet the study of that interaction—of the effects of religion on politics and the effects of politics on religion—is at best a fringe topic in political science, a fact noted and lamented by the few scholars (of any political stripe) who study it.

That neglect probably occurs because large numbers of political scientists either do not believe religion is an important cause or effect, or do not find religion intrinsically interesting for other reasons. This would likely be a significant research area if the discipline had more viewpoint diversity.

A second example concerns the study of the left and the right. In brief, there are many studies of leftist political parties and movements (unions, progressive social movements and activist groups) for every one of the right. And what study of the right there is, tends to focus on the most extreme or controversial groups.

In the study of modern French politics, for instance, there are numerous studies in political science (and political history and political sociology) of the Socialist and Communist parties, the modern Green movement, and other left-of-center groups. There are also many studies of the National Front, focused on that party’s nativism, xenophobia, and bigotry.

By contrast, the moderate center-right is the subject of a tiny number of monographs. This is not because that sector is objectively less important. The mainstream center-right has arguably been the dominant force in French politics for the past 60 years.

This is roughly being replicated across the region, as long-standing study of Europe's socialist, social democratic, and labor parties has recently been rivaled by fascination with extreme-right groups. All the while, study of Europe's influential moderate conservatives, classical liberals, and Christian Democrats is an academic backwater.

Consider two other examples specific to political science sub-fields:

International relations. This is probably the least distorted by academia's political tilt. Most obviously, the deterrence or peace-through-strength assumptions that are shared by many conservatives have remained a robust presence in international relations theorizing, especially in the form of the neo-realist school of thought.

That said, many questions that conservatives would logically ask go under-studied.

At the height of the Cold War, for example, America's liberals and conservatives were sharply divided by disagreements over Soviet conduct, events in developing countries, and the wisdom of different possible U.S. policies. Researchers have had some access to Communist-regime archival material since the fall of the USSR, and a window is now closing for interviews to be done on many questions, as Soviet-era officials pass from the scene.

Political scientists should be furiously asking questions like: What role did the Soviet Union play in Western European terrorism? Did the USSR encourage certain wars? How did they

perceive some controversial Reagan policies? Answers have the ability to shape how we think about the recent past and how we choose policies in the future.

Yet, while a few historians have tackled some of these Cold War issues, political scientists do far too little work on them. A political science populated by more conservatives might proceed very differently.

Comparative politics. This covers everything from constitutional dynamics across countries to election behavior, political economy, and transitions to democracy. One large literature asks why generous welfare states arose in most of Western Europe while a relatively slimmed-down counterpart developed in the United States. But there's been little research into the *performance* of these (and other) government programs. That might be explained by liberals' assumption that welfare and entitlement programs (like regulatory policies, affirmative action programs, and other policies) straightforwardly have precisely the effects they were intended to have.

Conservatives are more prone to treating the connection between the goals and the effects of policies as problematic. They are more likely to investigate, for instance, the ratio of intended to unintended consequences of redistributive policies. For example, have tax, regulatory, and welfare policy regimes contributed to persistently high unemployment?

Similarly, we have had to look more to maverick economists than to political scientists to ask whether aid and development policies have undermined growth in developing countries, in the process condemning hundreds of millions of people to malnutrition, poor health, and shortened lifespans. Those are natural questions for political scientists, but too few have shown much interest in them.

These examples help us see a political science that is biased,

in terms of what its current practitioners find interesting and believe important, and allow us to imagine ways in which it would be different if it were more intellectually diverse.

In this case, like in others, a call for greater diversity is not a push for the study of fewer topics but for the enriching study of more topics.

Political science, students, and the country would be better off for it.