

Introduction

In the nearly half-century between the formation of the American Political Science Association and the end of World War II, political science in the United States came into its own as a distinct professional academic discipline. Advanced degrees became increasingly commonplace as entry certificates to the profession, and amateurs were increasingly replaced by professors and graduate students on the APSA's membership rolls. Dozens of graduate schools and undergraduate departments were established. Annual APSA meetings had to be held in something larger than the average lecture room. In short, what we know today as the modern profession took shape.

Yet what gave intellectual and disciplinary integrity to the institutional growth? For many political scientists these days, political science before the 1950s is often remembered—if it is remembered at all—as a rather unsophisticated prelude to the succeeding behavioral and postbehavioral eras. There are, however, distinctive intellectual and political features of political science between 1903 and 1945, or at least distinctive enough to think of these four decades as something more than a mere prelude to what came later.

The most important intellectual characteristic of the developing discipline was what it took to be its “revolt against formalism.” The concerns of Lieber and Burgess were reduced in the minds of their successors to statist, institutional, and legal ones; and these were then derided as so much “soul stuff” by the likes of Arthur Bentley. Bentley urged that political science detail only the “process” or “pure activity” of “groups” in competition for power and political resources.¹ The comparative history of institutions was labeled as “dogmatic” by Charles Beard because it was alleged to mystify and sanctify the power of elites under a mound of abstractions and speculation. Even Woodrow Wilson, who had self-consciously tried to distance himself from any institutional formalism, was nonetheless said to lean too far in its direction.

1. Arthur Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908), chap. 1 and passim. Bentley's classic was particularly important when its intellectual orientation was recovered and revitalized later by E. Pendleton Herring, David Truman, and others. In its own day, however, it was harshly criticized, if it was not ignored, by many disciplinary leaders who nonetheless shared much of Bentley's criticism of late nineteenth-century political science.

The urge to discover, if not to unmask, the “real behavior” of people and groups acting within institutions helped to germinate a new research agenda for political science. At three Conferences on the Scientific Study of Politics held in the early 1920s, the study of “attitudes” was heralded as the fundamental task of new research. In what might be categorized as the “first behavioral revolution,” political scientists stalked “attitudes” by initiating studies of public opinion and propaganda, voting and nonvoting, political socialization and the psychological bases of participation. While the distinctiveness of the discipline’s mission was trumpeted, emulation of the techniques, methods, and approaches of other social science disciplines—most notably psychology, sociology, and economics—undergirded the new “realistic” studies.

As critical as they were of formal theories of the state, political scientists of this era remained quite interested in what might be called the study of “democratic state-building” in the American context. Emphasis on the study of attitudes, far from abandoning the study of the state, could help to bring about what Charles Beard called (as printed below) a “democratic state where the rule of the majority is frankly recognized” and “where government . . . is emancipated from formal limitations and charged with direct responsibility to the source of power.”

A new realism thus blended with a concern to develop a science of democracy that would support and even help create a positive and purposive government at the helm of the liberal democratic American state. Before World War I, and later as well, political scientists were actively engaged in the establishment of legislative reference bureaus, fact-gathering commissions, and civil-service training institutes at all levels of government.

The optimism in liberal democratic processes that these activities generated was dramatically tempered by World War I and its aftermath. In the next thirty years, optimism—if not America’s brand of liberal democracy itself—was put to the test both by events and by the results of the studies initiated by political scientists themselves. Psychological tests conducted during World War I, for example, revealed that the ordinary American soldier was hardly the rational, critical citizen that was supposed to be at the source of democracy. Books published somewhat later, most notably Harold Lasswell’s *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), created real doubts about the long-term viability of democracy. The rise of fascism and communism abroad raised further questions about the safety of liberal democracy in the West, while the Great Depression undermined confidence at home that American democracy, much less the American way of life, was “given” or uniquely exempted from the economic forces of the modern world.

In their responses to the perceived crisis of democratic liberalism, political scientists made many serious contributions of theory and practice. The

conscious construction of the social, political, and economic conditions that would fully realize or secure liberal democracy in the American context became a central concern. More sophisticated techniques and methods to study attitudes promoted not only better theories about democratic politics but provided a scientific basis for “social control” and thus the means to change American politics for the better. The election of Franklin Roosevelt as president seemed to make it possible for political scientists to have an enormous impact through public positions. A few, such as Charles Merriam, served directly as advisers to Roosevelt, operating under the belief, as Merriam himself had put it earlier (as printed below), that “unless a higher degree of science can be brought into the operations of government, civilization is in the greatest peril from the caprice of ignorance and passion.” Many others served more generally as consultants to commissions on administrative management or on economic planning, or as authors of studies advocating the reform and democratization of political parties. Civic education sparked renewed interest in political scientists who hoped to alter the rather disappointing findings of public opinion research about the citizenry’s lack of genuinely democratic attitudes.²

Of the six essays included below, those by Charles A. Beard and Charles E. Merriam are particularly instructive examples of the blend of politics and method that animated political scientists in these years. They also provide very forthright treatments of political science’s origins and purposes, even though they were written fifteen years apart and from rather different points of view. Remembered more frequently these days as a historian and especially as the author of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), Beard was nonetheless the virtual archetype of the reform political scientist of his generation. Beard’s essay was originally delivered as an address at Columbia University in 1908, well before his subsequent fame or his presidency of both the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association. Under the simple title “Politics,” it is a judicious but frank attack on what he calls the “axioms” of past politics. It is as clear a defense of the nexus of new forms of study with the rise of Progressive politics as can be found. In Beard’s essay, calls for political reform and for a new political science are virtually identical.

Merriam’s essay was originally the first part of a progress report issued in

2. See, for example, Charles Merriam’s *Civic Education in the United States* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), which was part of the American Historical Association’s broader Report of the Commission on the Social Studies in the Schools. More generally on the political activities and values during the period, see Barry Karl, *Executive Reorganization and the New Deal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); John Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); and Barry Karl, *Charles Merriam and the Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

1923 by the Committee on Political Research, which had been established by the APSA two years earlier. The progress report may be understood as one of the defining documents of the “first behavioral revolution” in the years following World War I, and Merriam’s essay in the report should be read as one of the discipline’s most synoptic overviews of its methodological history. The committee’s purpose was to “scrutinize the scope and method of political research in the field of government, with a view to obtaining a clearer view of the actual situation and of offering certain constructive suggestions.”³ In contrast to Beard, with whom he often disagreed, Merriam in his essay emphasizes the necessity for an impartial science of politics, one whose history should be understood in terms of the upward struggle to achieve objectivity, comprehensiveness, and methodological sophistication. In his view, political science ought to follow the lead of more mature scientific disciplines, especially psychology. Indeed, Merriam dates the last of four periods in the development of the discipline with “the beginnings of the psychological treatment of politics.” Although impartial in its methods, political science practiced in this way could best serve democracy and achieve its “highest form” in America by developing “more precise methods of political and social control than mankind has hitherto possessed.”

The essays by Benjamin E. Lippincott and Harold D. Lasswell present the reflections of two political scientists at the end of the New Deal and on the eve of World War II. Both echo certain of the themes of the Progressive era, at least in their methodological criticism of the discipline and their hopes for its democratic contributions. Surveying the discipline’s growth, Lippincott complains that the profession has sinned against reason and courage. Its empiricism (in part, the product of Merriam’s efforts) has ignored the systematic study of economics and politics, especially the influence of the upper classes on American politics. Bias, Lippincott argues, is also built into the discipline because its very categories issue from a middle-class professionalism. Fore-shadowing later forms of dissent in political science, Lippincott nonetheless stops well short of rejecting the scientific ideal as such. His is an effort to unmask bias but also to urge political scientists to undertake more controversial and democratically relevant research on the role of economic factors in political life.

Lasswell in his essay directly addresses the practical relationship between political science and democracy. A brilliant student of Merriam’s at Chicago who, like his teacher, later served as an APSA president, Lasswell gained fame for introducing or popularizing Marxian, Freudian, and Weberian categories in American political science. His research on power, propaganda,

3. “Progress Report of the Committee on Political Research,” *American Political Science Review* 17 (1923): 274.

public opinion, psychopathology, revolution, and the policy sciences represented an extraordinarily wide range of scholarly achievements. The essay chosen here comes not from his well-known scientific works—most notably *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) and *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1936)—but from *Democracy through Public Opinion* (1941), which was published just before the American entry into the war and was addressed to a more popular audience. Lasswell's chapter outlines why political scientists and other experts are indispensable to democratic society. While much of Lasswell's pioneering work fostered considerable skepticism about the prospects of democracy, Lasswell here holds that in a world where publics are subject to constant manipulation by elites, political science "experts" and "specialists" can be depended upon, as he puts it below, "to give eyes, ears, hands and feet to morality." Contrary to mere "moralists," researchers have a defined "method of observation" that can provide the means "to discover how democratic attitudes can be guided by proper insight." Here, then, is a classic expression of an argument for scientific expertise and social control as indispensable for modern democracy in mass society.

The section concludes with essays by two contemporary disciplinary historians, David M. Ricci and John G. Gunnell. In different ways, both are concerned with the interplay of political science and democratic liberalism during the prewar period. To Ricci, there is irony, even tragedy, in the political science of the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout the period, scientific evidence mounted against the cherished view that liberal democratic values were enshrined in the citizenry or in American institutions. Indeed, an irrational citizenry, an unresponsive government, and an incipient authoritarianism were political facts of life. Yet, political scientists could not forego defending liberalism because the liberal value of open inquiry helped to make science possible. The consequence, Ricci argues, was that political science wound up defending liberalism not with scientific facts about American political life but with little else than "enthusiasm for the home team."

Gunnell explores what he calls the contemporary "estrangement" of political theory from political science. His vehicle for doing so is an investigation of the origins of the conflict up to and through the 1940s. Gunnell finds that the source of the estrangement was the arrival of émigré scholars from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Both from the Left (especially the Frankfurt school of critical theorists) and from the Right (including Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and others) the émigrés shocked political scientists by their claims that both liberalism and science were complicit in the rise of totalitarianism. As can be seen by the other essays in this section, most American political scientists of the period took liberal and scientific values for granted. But the émigré attack challenged these values at their core. Gunnell finds that the traditions of political science as they were understood in the prewar period left

the discipline undefended. A revolution in the discipline's self-understanding was needed. Thus Gunnell turns our attention to the postwar period and especially to the second, better-known "behavioral revolution," viewing it in good part as a rebellion launched in response to the émigrés' attack.