APSA Presidential Address: The Public Role of Political Science

By Robert D. Putnam

I'm pleased to report that the health of the American Political Science Association (APSA), and of political science as a discipline, is excellent.

The program at the 2002 APSA convention highlighted numerous advances in our understanding of politics—in areas ranging from religion, violence, and terrorism, to the impact of malls on downtown development. The *American Political Science Review* is stronger than ever under its energetic new editor, Lee Sigelman. Under the leadership of Jennifer Hochschild, we have founded an exciting new journal, *Perspectives on Politics,* to help build ties across different subfields and between our discipline and the wider world. We have a brand-new executive director, Michael Brintnall.

APSA's council has authorized the creation of three new task forces of our colleagues to bring to bear the best social scientific evidence on several major public issues. We are in the midst of a lively debate about the methods and aims of political science that will advance our shared goal of deepening our understanding of politics. We're also in the midst of a lively debate about the association's governance, which I'm pleased to bequeath to my successors. Despite some jeremiads that you may have heard about the decline of bowling leagues in America, APSA membership and attendance at the 2002 convention have neared all-time highs. *We,* at least, are bowling together.

Against that optimistic backdrop, I want here to discuss some aspects of our professional role and obligations. What is the job of political science? In part, it is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. As is true of all intellectual endeavors, an important part of what draws us into the discipline is the sheer aesthetic pleasure of it—a novel insight into a familiar passage of Machiavelli, an elegant proof of a theorem about public choice, the dawning recognition of an unexpected pattern in survey data, the subtle appreciation of politics in a foreign culture. Every one of us has felt the excitement of successfully pursuing deep scholarship. As Picasso and Einstein and Elvis agreed in their imaginary encounter as Steve Martin's guests at the Lapin Agile, art and science share a fundamental reverence for elegance. Any intellectual field develops, at least in part, according to its own autonomous rhythms, untrammeled by utilitarian concerns, as each new (inevitably partial) truth opens unexpected vistas.

However, I wish to make a different point here, a more utilitarian argument about the purposes of political science. My argument is that an important and underappreciated part of our professional responsibility is to engage with our fellow citizens in deliberation about their political concerns, broadly defined. Political science must have a greater public presence.

This facet of our professional responsibilities—our contributions to public understanding and to the vitality of democracy—is not the only goal of political science, but it has been an important one since the founding of the discipline and the profession. However, in recent years, I believe, the salience of this goal within the profession has dimmed.

A single illustration: The Strategic Planning Committee two years ago—in addition to proposing many thoughtful reforms of APSA—drafted a mission statement for the association. The committee was a diverse group of 12 outstanding political scientists, representing all parts of the discipline. Here is their David Letterman–like list of the top 10 objectives of professional political science:[1]

1. Promoting scholarly research and communications, domestically and internationally
2. Promoting high quality teaching and education about politics and government
3. Diversifying the profession and representing its diversity
4. Increasing academic and nonacademic opportunities for members
5. Strengthening the professional environment for political scientists
6. Representing the professional interests of political scientists
7. Defending the legitimacy of scholarly research into politics and government
8. Recognizing outstanding work in the discipline
9. Encouraging the application of rigorous ethical and intellectual standards in the profession

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And finally . . .

10. Serving the public, including disseminating research and preparing citizens to be effective citizens and political participants.

In placing our vocational interests (publications, teaching, scholarly awards, job security, and so on) at the top of this list, I believe that the committee was faithfully reflecting the fact that serving the public (and the public interest) has become an afterthought to our other professional rights and duties.

To be sure, eloquent voices have frequently been raised in recent years in defense of the public responsibilities of the profession—Rogers Smith, Larry Diamond, Raymond Seidelman, and many others.[2] However, in recent debates the strongest advocates of public purpose for our profession have also been the most severe critics of our scientific aspirations. They have argued passionately that a mistaken pursuit of rigor has undermined the relevance of our scholarship.

Attending to the concerns of our fellow citizens is not just an optional add-on for the profession of political science, but an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific truth.

Conversely, the most powerful advocates of our scientific mission have been largely silent on our public purposes. I do not mean that our statisticians and behaviorists and formal theorists have entirely ignored public issues in their own work, but rather that they have not articulated the argument that attending to these issues is part of our professional duty. On the contrary, some of the smartest and most systematic of our colleagues have expressed deep skepticism that contribution to the public weal is a feasible or desirable aspiration for political science. As one of our most distinguished colleagues is reported to have responded when asked about the implications of her work, "I would like to make the world a better place. Do I think I can do that? No way."[3]

Let me offer an example of how this attitude has stunted our contribution to public life. As is well known, for most of the last four decades more and more of our fellow citizens have expressed distrust in the fidelity and operations of government in America.[4] Since government is our business, one might have thought that this public alienation would have occasioned a great debate within the profession about how to respond. But if you had thought that, you would have been wrong.

As a profession, we traced the trend but largely dismissed it as a mere curiosity. We explained, first, that our fellow citizens were simply wrong—that malfeasance in high places had declined, not increased. We added that since trust in government seemed uncorrelated with any of the other variables that we typically survey, it was essentially statistical noise. And even when we admitted that this public unease might be a settled judgment, we dismissed the idea that we had any professional ability—much less any professional obligation—to respond. None of the reforms proposed by non–political scientists would work, we condescendingly explained. Finally and most devastatingly, we took it as our job to show why any really promising reform could never be enacted and implemented. We warned of unanticipated consequences ("It could be worse," we said). Our advice to our fellow citizens who expressed growing unease about politics and government: "Cool it."

As Thomas Mann notes in an article on campaign finance reform, we "fancied ourselves an intellectual truth squad, endowed by our training and research to cut through the cant in the public debate, exposing specious claims and ill-advised reform proposals."[5] We became the profession of the three *no*s: no problem, no solution, no reform.

I do not deny for a moment that "intellectual truth squad" is a valuable role. Cant needs exposing. I genuinely admire the work of our distinguished colleagues who have performed that role. However, we also have other obligations as a profession. If the role of debunker is the only one we play on issues of concern to wide swaths of our fellow citizens, then we are in the position of a cancer researcher who counsels a worried patient that nothing can be done. The advice might be clinically accurate, but it is in a deeper sense unresponsive. Finding better answers is the whole point of medical research—and although the analogy is imperfect, finding better answers should be a more important part of what political scientists do.

In short, I believe that attending to the concerns of our fellow citizens is not just an optional add-on for the profession of political science, but an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific truth. And yet unlike others who have recently argued a similar point of view, I do not believe that ignoring and even ridiculing quantitative and mathematical rigor is the right path forward.

It matters, both ethically and practically, whether democratic regimes are more peaceable than are nondemocratic ones, but it is impossible to adjudicate that claim without counting. It matters whether (and how) congressional oversight restrains bureaucratic misbehavior, but it is impossible to parse that issue fully without careful logic and systematic evidence. Trends in social and political inequality are of the highest moral and practical urgency, but quantitative methods are essential to measuring inequality. Rigorous formal analysis is essential to designing institutional frameworks for resolving ethnic conflict.

If you listened to the debate in the discipline over the last several years, you might reasonably conclude that political scientists need to choose between scientific rigor and public relevance. Note the title of Rogers Smith's essay that I have already cited approvingly: "Should We Make Political Science More of a Science or More about Politics?" I believe that the *or* in that question presumes a false dichotomy. Advocacy of relevance cannot be left to the critics of rigor, just as advocacy of rigor should not be the monopoly of skeptics of relevance.

The idea that political science can be either rigorous or relevant, but not both, is analogous (though not identical) to the fallacy that Donald E. Stokes explored in his book *Pasteur's Quadrant*—namely, the mistaken idea that research must be

either "basic" (that is, aimed at fundamental understanding) or "applied" (that is, aimed at practical utility). Stokes showed that, in fact, much research (including the biochemical research of the eponymous French scientist) aims simultaneously at basic understanding and practical utility. Research on global warming has produced advances in basic understanding of atmospheric chemistry, and John Maynard Keynes's contributions to economic theory arose in response to the Great Depression.[6] Often the best science is done while pursuing the most urgent public problems.

I'm not sure why we have the impression that rigor and relevance are antithetical, but it was not always so. The founders of APSA did not see any conflict between these two aspirations. Indeed, the emergence of all the social sciences as distinct disciplines and professions a century ago was tied inextricably to a desire both to foster social and political reform and to develop a more rigorous, empirical, scientific understanding of social and political problems.[7]

It would, I fear, sidetrack us to pause here for an extended discussion of what "science" means in political science. My use is both catholic and conventional: theoretically framed, empirically rigorous (replicable) generalizations—in short, "portable, testable knowledge."

In arguing that scientific rigor and public relevance are mutually supportive and that both are at the core of our professional obligations, I am echoing most specifically Charles Merriam and Charles Beard, two of my most distinguished predecessors as presidents of APSA (in 1923 and 1924, respectively). Our founders were concerned precisely about marrying rigor and relevance. Not really until the 1960s and 1970s, as Raymond Seidelman has argued, did the view that rigor and relevance were opposing virtues come to dominate the profession.[8]

To be sure, as Dorothy Ross has described, in all the social sciences, waves of scientism and activism have succeeded one another in a dialectic process. Moreover, this is a matter of more/less, not either/or; and ours is a marvelously diverse profession, so even in the high seasons of activism, large numbers of political scientists have been working steadily at what our colleagues in the physical sciences call "bench science." Conversely, even at the highest tides of scientism, plenty of our colleagues have made important contributions to public life. Nevertheless, a more historically situated analysis than I can provide here would, I imagine, show that we are nearing the end of a period in which activism has been de-emphasized and even de-legitimated by our professional norms. Or at least I hope that era is ending. In that I share the aspirations of recent critics, though I do not share their denigration of our scientific aspirations.

What contributions do we have to make? Now as in the past, political scientists contribute to public life in varied ways:

First, we influence public policy by personal involvement. That involvement may be in elective office (as illustrated by the career of our colleague Congressman David Price) or senior positions in the executive branch, either locally (as our colleague Doug Rae did in his service as city manager of New Haven, Connecticut) or nationally (as our colleague Condoleezza Rice is now doing as national security adviser). Many of us, I conjecture, are active in various social movements—locally, nationally, and internationally. More often, we offer expertise on issues as diverse as electoral redistricting, welfare reform, and democratization, although in this domain our efforts are dwarfed by those of our colleagues in other social sciences, especially economics.

Second, we train undergraduate, graduate, and mid-career students who then participate in public life in the United States or abroad. Indeed, for most of us the primary impact that we personally will have on public life is through the deeds of our students. Although that influence is sometimes hard to trace, all teachers know that in many respects the most satisfying reward for our work is the accomplishments of those we have taught.

Third, we produce scholarship that is relevant to public issues (in recent years, this has been the most underexploited avenue). In some cases the implications of our scholarship may be immediately relevant to ongoing debates within the polity—campaign finance is one recent example, as Thomas Mann has shown, but other colleagues have undertaken similar work on topics as diverse as health care, military strategy, and the pursuit of human rights. Nor is this sort of contribution limited to "policy analysis" in a narrow sense. For example, as America grapples with the continuing risks or facts of war in the Middle East and South Asia, political scientists with expertise on the history and politics of the region—able to provide careful, insightful "thick description"—can make a crucial contribution to enlightened public debate, quite apart from whatever policy recommendations they themselves offer.

However, the most important contribution that political scientists might make to public life consists not in answering questions currently being asked, but in framing new questions. Our role here is to highlight ignored values, to identify important but underappreciated factors that affect those values, and to explicate the underlying logic that links facts and values. As Carol Weiss has observed,

> The social sciences . . . bring fresh perspectives into the policy arena, new understandings of cause and effect; they challenge assumptions that had been taken for granted and give credibility to options that were viewed as beyond the pale. They provide enlightenment. . . . Although good data are useful and build credibility, equally important is the [social science] perspective on entities, processes, and events. Participants in the policy process can profit from an understanding of the forces and currents that shape events, and from the structures of meaning that [social scientists] derive from their theories and research.[9]

Because our discipline, more than any other social science, gives a place of honor to explicit, reasoned debate about normative issues, we have an unusual potential to frame issues that inevitably straddle the fact-value boundary. To do publicly engaged political science, we have to be prepared to be boundary-crossers in this sense. Our values powerfully influence what we choose to study, as well as our policy recommendations, and in that sense our work is intrinsically value-laden. On the other hand, our investigation of the facts can and should be governed by objective rules. In that sense, I agree with Max Weber's view, as synthesized in a fine recent essay by Steve Hoenisch: "Science and politics are, for Weber, not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually inclusive."[10]

In order to foster the kind of political science I am advocating, we need to make a special effort, both in the research we publish and in the courses we teach, to combine careful attention to facts and careful attention to values, while recognizing the difference between the two. I am skeptical about a value-free social science and about a fact-free philosophical critique. Investigation of the facts is not sufficient to resolve social issues, but it is necessary. Those of us who seek to frame major public issues need to be equally respectful of demands for normative and empirical rigor. To my more scientific colleagues, I urge (paraphrasing, I believe, the statistician John Tukey), "Better an approximate answer to an important question than an exact answer to a trivial question," while to my less scientific colleagues, I urge, "More precise is better."

Nothing that I have said so far implies that for publicly engaged political science "anything goes." On the contrary, those of us who do work of this sort must be prepared for heightened scrutiny. When speaking professionally about public issues, we should be subject to the same kind of peer review as in our purely scholarly role. If, for example, I argue that American civic engagement has declined and that this decline ought to be reversed, it is entirely legitimate to ask both whether the facts really fit my claim and whether the values implied in my critique are intellectually coherent. What we write for public audiences should be—and is—fair game for vigorous scholarly critique.

Pursuing a more engaged political science will require us to cross other boundaries, too. First of all, a focus on problems, not methods, will require us to seek more active collaboration across disciplinary boundaries—with economics, sociology, psychology, history, and other fields. In interdisciplinary collaboration, political science has a distinct comparative advantage. We are a porous, poaching discipline, incessantly borrowing methods and concepts from other fields. Over the last two decades, fully 20 percent of APSA presidents have received their doctorates from other disciplines: one psychologist, one economist, and two sociologists. Moreover, these colleagues (Philip Converse, Charles Lindblom, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Theda Skocpol) have been among our most acclaimed leaders. Political science is probably the most cosmopolitan of the social sciences.

A more difficult boundary-crossing is between theory and practice, between the congenial ivy-covered tower and the hurly-burly of the public square. An engaged political science must talk with our fellow citizens, not just at them. Rather than the European intellectual, a "gadfly" (in the language of Rogers Smith) standing apart from current politics and viewing with a critical, philosophical eye the gap between what is and what ought to be, my hero is the midwestern progressive of a century ago, seeking to learn from the experience of nonacademic reformers. My image of a more engaged political science is neither a wise counselor whispering truth to power nor a distanced gadfly. It is a political scientist engaged in genuine dialogue with our fellow citizens, learning as well as teaching.

I am not starry-eyed about collaboration between academics and practitioners. Over recent years I have gathered some practical experience of this dialogue, as I have worked with grass-roots groups across the country on issues of civic renewal. I have learned that even when our scholarship has unexpected resonance for many ordinary Americans, there is a surprisingly big gap between our scientific knowledge and their practical concerns. Our ready answers don't easily fit their most urgent questions, and it's no use simply telling them to rephrase the question. When the superintendent of schools in San Diego asks what he should do about enhancing civic engagement among the exceptionally diverse group of students for whom he is responsible, it's no use simply quoting either Plato or M. Kent Jennings, however insightful those two very different sages are on issues of political socialization.

And even when we have things to say that *are* relevant to our fellow citizens, we often don't phrase our knowledge in accessible ways. Jargon has its place, but the most useful tool for an engaged political science would be an editorial blue pencil. As a profession, we too often disdain "popularization" and are appalled by the idea of "marketing" our ideas, but if we are to engage in civic deliberation with our fellow citizens, we need to learn to speak ordinary English. As Larry Diamond argues, "[P]olitical scientists have an obligation to write for and speak to broader, non-academic audiences."[11] Again, I do not mean to suggest that that is a simple task, for it requires hard thought to frame our professional insights in ways that are accessible to those outside our craft. Nevertheless, that discipline would be good for us.

And we should be modest about what we have to offer in public life. My claim is not that as philosopher-kings we have indispensable knowledge, but that we can be helpful in framing problems, elucidating values, and adducing facts. I prefer Charles Beard's metaphor: political science doesn't really solve public problems, but we can "shed light" on them. And we have a professional obligation to do so.

So far I've made a case in theoretical terms, but not in terms of examples. Political science can contribute professional insights and evidence to many public discussions. Indeed, many were illustrated at the 2002 APSA convention:

- The role of religion in politics; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its implications for world order.
- The challenges that ethnic cleavages, which are clearly not fading with modernization, pose to democratization.
- The growing role of wealth in American politics, the implications for political equality, and what might be done to address that issue.
- The normative and historical complexities of reconciling civil liberties and national security.

Beyond these illustrations, I want briefly to cite three specific cases that seem to me especially ripe for our professional attention.

First, what is the role of political science in helping to frame a sensible debate about globalization and perhaps in helping to craft new institutions for a globalizing world? The United States has a degree of power in the world today that is probably historically unprecedented, a dominion that exceeds that of Great Britain at its peak and perhaps Rome at its peak. How should we use this moment? Political scientists should be even more present in that debate. However, I shall forbear from detailed discussion of this case, precisely because it was, in different ways, the topic

of the inspired presidential addresses of my two predecessors Robert Keohane and Robert Jervis.

Second, what should be the role of political science in helping to frame and diagnose issues of social justice? The most important contemporary example in this domain, I believe, comes from the simultaneous increase in the United States (and some other advanced nations) of ethnic diversity and social and economic inequality. Recent research suggests as stylized facts that equality, homogeneity, and community (social capital) are strongly correlated, both across space and across time. American society has witnessed rapid declines in all three domains during the last several decades.

The most certain prediction about all advanced societies, from New Zealand to Finland, is that ethnic diversity will grow in the years ahead. In itself, that is basically a healthy trend. Yet social justice demands that we reverse the decline in equality, and social health demands that we reverse the decline in social capital. Perhaps the most fundamental problem facing America, and most other advanced democracies, over the next several decades will be to reconcile the demands of diversity, equality, and community. This is a quintessential *big issue,* needing contributions from many disciplines, from theoreticians and empiricists and practitioners. If my argument here is correct, then political scientists have a professional responsibility to contribute to the nascent debate.

Third, what is the role of political science in helping to frame and remedy civic disengagement? Five years ago, there was still a lively and necessary debate about the facts. (Has there been disengagement or not?) As a party to that debate, I am not entirely objective, but I believe that it has been largely settled both in the academy and beyond. We now widely agree that involvement by Americans in political life has declined over the last three decades, that much of that decline is concentrated among youth, and that this development is unhealthy both individually and collectively. The same trend, at least in broad outline, appears in other advanced democracies, and we can learn from their attempts to grapple with the problem, but for American political scientists, our first obligation is to attend to the problem here at home.[12]

If that is so, we need to work simultaneously at both the institutional and the individual level—that is, we must consider political and social reforms that invite and facilitate greater citizen engagement, and we must consider how to enhance the civic skills and interests of young people. While not denigrating the importance of structural issues, I want to say a word about the second facet of the problem: civic education.

Concern about citizenship and civic engagement is lodged in our professional DNA. From its founding a century ago, APSA has been deeply involved in projects to reform civic education.[13] Although more historical analysis of the evolution of civic education in America in the twentieth century is needed, it appears that by the 1960s at least two-thirds of all high school students were taking at least one course (and often two) in civics.[14] In the turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War, however, most of those courses were abolished and then gradually replaced by courses in "American government," mostly inspired by political science.

This curricular transformation seems to have been accompanied by a subtle but powerful shift in focus and agency. Instead of encouraging students to think of themselves as political actors, empowered to take part in politics, the new curriculum appears to foster a somewhat cynical spectatorship—not what we can do in civic life, but what others do, with or without us; not how we can influence public life, but who else has influence. A hypothesis worth investigating is that this transformation in civic education from active involvement to passive analysis may have had something to do with the generational disengagement that followed. If so, then in some measure a Pogovian diagnosis applies to the problem of political science and civic disengagement: We have met the enemy, and he is us. This is not the place to lay out a program for revitalization of America's civic curriculum.[15] However, if I am right, this is yet another topic of public concern to which we have a professional obligation to contribute.

While the balance between activism and scientism within our profession has varied over the last century, the right image for this, as for our intellectual development more generally, is not a pendulum but a spiral, which never returns to exactly the same point. In the middle years of the last century, formal institutional analysis was succeeded by the so-called behavioral revolution, which was then succeeded by a *new* institutionalism, far from identical to the older institutionalism and incorporating many advances of the intervening years. So too I hope that as we return to a phase of more active engagement with the public world, we will do so informed by the contributions of our more recent, scientific phase. I seek a more problem-driven political science—not instead of our more recent method-driven political science, but alongside it, relying on, not rejecting, the valuable analytic tools that we have fashioned.

There are, of course, risks to a more engaged political science. The tension between advocacy and disinterested expertise could threaten our academic credibility. APSA's constitution precludes the association from taking partisan stands on public issues, while in the very next sentence urging political scientists to become engaged with controversial topics of public concern.[16] Moreover, since experts almost always differ, a more engaged discipline would be—should be—a more contentious discipline. Occasionally, the Progressive Era founders of our discipline espoused what now seems a naive notion that science would provide "one right answer" to social and political issues, but the more dialogic interpretation of our public role that I have defended advances no such simple aspiration.

Frankly, however, the greater risk is not that contributions of political science to public life will be controversial, but that they will be ignored. As my predecessor Charles Beard observed nearly a century ago, "If the student of politics prescribes a remedy that pleases [some powerful group], he will probably be hailed as a scientist; if his suggestion is unpalatable, he is only a professor after all."[17] But Beard did not find that a conclusive argument against an engaged political science, and neither do I.

On American empire, diversity and inequality, civic engagement, and many more issues, we have a professional obligation to engage in dialogue with our fellow citizens. Within the profession, we need a vigorous dialogue in which advocates of a critical, reformist political science take seriously the work of our self-consciously scientific colleagues, not merely as the activities of a

foreign tribe contending for the same disciplinary turf. And similarly, those of us who are more comfortable with counting and modeling should take more seriously our public obligations. None of this will be easy. As Max Weber said when contemplating precisely the same issue in an equally confusing, epoch-making period more than eight decades ago, "[P]olitics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards."[18] It is our highest calling.

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Notes

1 Planning our future 2000.

2 Smith 2002; Diamond 2002; Seidelman 1985.

3 Professor Joanne Gowa, University of Pennsylvania, during a public forum on the discipline of political science, 22 April 2002, as quoted in Rosof 2002.

4 This growing political alienation is not limited to the United States. See Pharr and Putnam 2000.

5 Mann 2003, 72–3.

6 Stokes 1997.

7 See Ross 1993.

8 Seidelman 1985.

9 Weiss 1993, 28, 37, as cited in Wilson 2002. Weiss refers specifically to sociology, but her point applies to the other social sciences as well.

10 Hoenisch n.d.

11 Diamond 2002.

12 For my own position, see Putnam 2000. As noted in Pharr and Putnam 2000, political participation has declined in many advanced democracies in the last several decades, although whether the etiology of these trends is identical everywhere is a matter of debate.

13 See Schachter 1998 and Snyder 2001. Civic disengagement was a central scholarly concern of many of the founders of APSA. See, for example, Merriam and Gosnell 1924 and Merriam 1931.

14 This paragraph and the next rely in part on Schwartz 2002 and Niemi and Smith 2001.

15 In response to a similar problem, in 2002 the Blair government in Britain instituted a new national citizenship curriculum, and systematic evaluations of its effectiveness are now under way.

16 "The Association . . . will not support political parties or candidates. It will not commit its members on questions of public policy nor take positions not immediately concerned with its direct purpose as stated above. But the Association nonetheless actively encourages in its membership and its journals, research in and concern for significant contemporary political and social problems and policies, however controversial and subject to partisan discourse in the community at large these may be." *Constitution of the American Political Science Association,* Article II, paragraph 2.

17 Beard 1993, 126. Originally from a lecture delivered at Columbia University, 12 February 1908.

18 Weber 1946, 128.