

The Discipline of Political Science in Europe: How Different Is It from Political Science in North America?

Introduction

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On June 23, 2016 the electorate of the United Kingdom (UK) made the decision in a referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU). Of all the twists and turns and ups and downs in the history of European integration, this result is by far the most significant. After all, it is the first time that an EU member-state has made the decision to leave the EU. It will be many years before the implications of this decision are fully understood, not least because the formal requirements to leave the EU will require a complicated series of negotiations and will result in considerable debate and discussion as to the nature of the relationship that the UK will carve out with the EU. However, one of the most notable areas of concern in the EU referendum debate was the way in which experts, including political scientists, were often viewed with derision by the public as individuals who were part of an elite group that did not represent their interests or concerns. This is a significant development as it raises an important question about the way in which academic experts are viewed by the public and brings to the fore issues such as outreach and public engagement. In reflecting on these developments, and in particular the referendum, it is evident that at the very least the outcome showed democracy at work, even though the results tell us little about the underlying motives of the people which are often shaped by a myriad of factors. This in itself is not a new issue, with the fine line between real referenda outcomes and the actual meaning of the vote

having been the subject of academic debate over the years (c.f. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995).

Whether we are teaching Comparative Political Institutions or Electoral Institutions, the implications of the UK referendum will stand out as a true and natural experiment of putting electoral tools to work. Debates discussing the benefits and the costs of direct vs. indirect democracy, presidentialism vs. parliamentarism, proportional representation vs. first-past-the-post can be easily stimulated. Ultimately, however, most differences in political structures come down to the question of representation vs. accountability—each concept has its virtues and judging one better than the other is not a straightforward task.

The dualism in many political science concepts might be reflected in the different manners in which political science has developed as a field in Europe and the United States. How do we *do* political science? What *is* political science? How do we *teach* it? How do we *advance* it? The articles included in the symposium address most of these questions by tackling specific issues relating to our *doing* and *teaching* of political science in Europe. In particular, they show evidence that the practice of political science in Europe and the United States or North America is distinct. On the one hand there are commonalities on both sides of the Atlantic, such as a strong emphasis on research rather than teaching, or an increase in the number of students enrolled in secondary and tertiary education. Yet on the other, the differences are much more pronounced. The differences stretch from recruitment (fixed term contracts in many European countries versus tenure track lines in North America) to the relevance of the discipline (a greater focus on policy in Europe as compared to the US), to financing (a tuition hike in the US versus still predominantly free education in Europe) to a more developed ethics regime in North America in contrast to many European countries.

Offering five studies on the status of the discipline in European, compared to US political science, this symposium

hopes to introduce European Political Science to a North American public. We open the discussion with an article on the academic job market in Europe, with a special emphasis on its implications for political science. In looking for differences and similarities among the many European countries, we learn that the trend of higher enrollments has increased the number of academic jobs, albeit at different rates (i.e. 10% in the UK and over 50% in Germany). Alexandre Afonso presents a typology of the openness for international applicants and job security in the academic labor markets in western and southern Europe. He shows that there are only three states where the academic job market is similar to North America; that is, both open to international scholars, as well as secure (through tenure track lines). Most other markets are either less secure (e.g. Germany) with no tenure track lines or tend to hire people from within (e.g. France and Spain); these closed markets tend to use legal means to control the market (for example by language or local knowledge requirements). A rather grimmer trend, which is also observed in the more liberal job market of the United States, is the reliance on lecturers paid per class with no permanent or longer fixed term contract in such countries as Germany and the UK.

The second article by Jo Ritzen looks at the effects of the financial crisis on European universities. Ritzen shows that

gender dimension; and a much greater involvement of audio-visual resources (as well as an increased use of simulations) in teaching and learning politics (Jiménez 2015).

The relevance of political science for policy is discussed by Bo Rothstein in the next article. Rothstein begins by noting the heated debate among American politicians about whether or not to maintain political science research funding. He uses this to motivate a discussion about the differences in relevancy and policy impact between European and American political science. He comes up with three reasons for why, as he argues, European political science has a greater impact on policy, and thus society, than its US counterpart. According to Rothstein the three reasons for this are: (1) the exodus of trained political scientists to law; (2) the strict divide between political science and public administration (which renders US political science overly theoretical); and (3) the lack of dialogue within the discipline of political science itself, namely between what he refers to as political theory/philosophy and empirical research. According to Rothstein, these three “iron walls” render US political science overtly theoretical and detached from actual policy.

The symposium closes with an article on ethics and ethical considerations within academia and political science. Daniela R. Piccio examines research ethics standards among European

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the effects of the crisis have been unequal across Europe. In some countries—such as Germany or the Nordic countries—the crisis has had little to no effect on education spending. In others the budget cuts on research have, or rather will have, a lasting negative effect on the quality of graduates and the quality of research produced. These cuts also have come in direct contrast to the EU’s “Lisbon Strategy” of 2010, which hoped to make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Jones 2005). At the same time, access to higher education has remained equal and affordable and presents a major difference to the increased tuition fees we see in many American universities.

In the third article, Jacqui Briggs tackles the question of teaching vs. research excellence. She observes that one of the most important developments within the discipline is the greater emphasis on teaching and teaching skills in Europe. This is driven, on the one hand, by the realization of many universities that they can only survive by keeping high enrollment (but also high graduation rates), and on the other by the demands of students to receive “greater value for money.” In examining the state of undergraduate and graduate education today, she points to three observable changes in recent years: an increased emphasis upon the students’ voice; an expanded

states to discover that there is still little institutionalized ethical oversight, despite the overarching umbrella of European directives. She notes that while research ethics committees and ethical reviews of grant proposals are increasing in number, they are the exception more than the norm. This is particularly the case in the social and political sciences. She reports that only three countries in Europe have established laws to regulate research integrity (Norway, Denmark, and Romania). Rather than formal and institutionalized ethics boards, there is a proliferation of non-binding codes of ethics and guidelines on good scientific practice put forward by national ethics committees, research funding organizations, individual research institutes and universities, and professional organizations. In this sense, Piccio’s article points to a stark difference between the strictly regulated ethics schemes in North America, which demand formal ethics approval for all research involving human subjects, and the less formalized practices in Europe.

So what do we learn from these contributions? We learn that the most distinct strength of European political science is the capacity of the discipline to pay something back to society. We can see this through the continued emphasis on equal access to higher education, despite the financial

hardships that most countries have undergone (and are continuing to experience). We can see this in the increased emphasis on fostering gender equality, both within teaching as well as the student body, and we can see this in the considerably stronger link between political science and public administration departments, as well as with governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in everyday policy making. However, the European discipline is not

While the need to secure external funding is shared in both North America and Europe, there are several more Europe-specific challenges. The largest one is the diversity of European political science. While differences in subjects taught, the organization of curricula, classes, and research subjects can be a strength, these differences can also turn into weaknesses. The latter is the case if the discipline and job markets remain closed, if universities do not encourage

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without its challenges. One of the biggest challenges, which none of the five contributors is tackling, is the increased competition for research and teaching funds within European political science (and academia more generally). As a result, grant writing has become one of the most important, if irritating, parts of the modern academy. Writing, and winning, grant proposals has become “the nature of the game” for scholars of all generations, but especially those still at the junior level who need to secure permanent employment. In many countries, regardless of whether the academic job market is open or closed, the ability to secure third-party funding almost always guarantees the recipient a promotion. In that sense, the need for additional resources has turned grant money into an almost necessary tool for climbing the professional ladder.

the dissemination of research that can be read by the European and worldwide community of political scientists, and if there are no clear-cut ethical standards and guidelines for the proper conduct of research. European political science is heading in this direction, but we are still a long way from the ideal of a transparent, open, and pan-European discipline. ■

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