

PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

Contentious Politics in the United States: What Role for Political Scientists?

Introduction

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Teaching political science on college campuses in the United States in the past two years has been anything but “business as usual.” Political science faculty and their campus communities are simultaneously witnessing a dramatic increase in tension and polarization across differences as well as a resurgent community engagement around shared values and intersectional interests. As political scientists, we are observing a rise in racial and religious tensions, class divisions, and a deepening distrust in government and democratic institutions that to us seem unprecedented. At the same time, we are witnessing a rise in civic engagement and expression, a sustained social-protest movement, and an increase in the number of women and minorities seeking elected office for the first time. As citizens, we are working to make government understandable to our colleagues, neighbors, and communities in a context defined by a heightened distrust of experts and a growing anti-intellectualism. As teachers, we recognize that college campuses are undergoing the same transformations taking place in American society at large and that this political, racial, religious, and economic diversity makes our college campuses sites of contentious politics.

In speaking with colleagues around the country, we realized that many political scientists were grappling similarly with how to respond to the challenges facing our democratic society. Our symposium asks three main questions: What role should political scientists play in this current period of contentious politics? How can we build campuses to be both bastions of free expression and safe places for exploration? How should we engage our neighbors, communities, students, and the public? From the numerous compelling submissions to our call for proposals, it is clear that this topic has hit a nerve and that scientists are eager to engage. We offer in these pages a

toolbox of sorts for political scientists seeking to navigate the contentious current politics.

This symposium addresses several broad themes, including ways to strengthen civic engagement in our classrooms, across our campuses, and in our broader communities. Symposium authors represent diverse subfields of our discipline and various institutions from small private liberal arts colleges to large public research universities. Collectively, the authors remind us of the ways that individuals are embedded within communities and how those communities and their values shape the behavior of individual members, making actions such as voting and bullying communal as well as individual acts. They challenge us to foster critical thinking by helping students and citizens to separate fact from falsehood and to challenge their own assumptions. They stress the need for political scientists to interrogate power hierarchies in American society as well as within our own discipline. Our authors remind us that however we choose to engage in this political moment, students and community members are watching and that our action or inaction will communicate the value of political science in addressing the challenges of contemporary society.

The current political and social context in the United States is characterized in part by divisive trends, such as increasing partisan polarization, a surge in populist nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, a more fragmentary media landscape, and deepening distrust in government and civic institutions. In 2017, an overwhelming majority of American adults (86%) describe the country as more divided than in the past (Pew Research Center 2017, 1). Likewise, levels of interpersonal trust in the United States are generally low, with only 35% of respondents in a recent survey stating that “most people can be trusted” (World Values Survey 1981–2014). Although it is too early to determine whether it is a lasting trend, highly publicized hate crimes in the aftermath of the November 2016 presidential election have generated fear that hate is on the rise. From early January to early March 2017, multiple Jewish cemeteries in Rochester, St. Louis, and Philadelphia were vandalized (Berlinger and Frehse 2017) and four mosques were burned to the ground in Texas, Washington,

and Florida (Yan and Cuevas 2017). The Southern Poverty Law Center identified 917 active hate groups in the United States in 2016—a slight increase from 892 hate groups identified in 2015. Anti-Muslim hate groups, however, grew by an alarming 197%, from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016 (Potok 2017). Religious bias accounts for approximately 20% of hate crimes in the United States. Another 60% of hate-crime victims are

participated in a demonstration in the previous five years (Benac 2017).

As of this writing, it appears that civic engagement has achieved a sustained momentum. Grassroots groups such as Tuesdays with Toomey apply weekly pressure to elected officials; citizens flood town hall meetings with their representatives and jam Senate telephone lines with their calls

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targeted on the basis of their race, ethnicity, or ancestry and approximately 20% on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender bias (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2015). Symposium authors Michael Suk-Young Chwe and Elizabeth Levy Paluck urge citizens to act collectively to prevent hate crimes and bullying by convincing potential perpetrators that community members oppose and will socially sanction acts of hate.

The current political context also is characterized by widespread dissatisfaction with government institutions, which translates to low levels of political efficacy. American confidence in Congress has decreased from 52% reporting “a great deal” or “quite a lot” in 1981 to only 21% reporting favorable views in 2014 (World Values Survey 1981–2014). Although there is some disagreement in the literature, it is generally believed that a cynical view of government affects citizen engagement and voter turnout (Gronlund and Setala 2007; Teixeira 1992/2011). Contributors Carrie Eaves and Jason Husser argue that political scientists play a critical role in communicating the importance of government. They describe how a campus-wide commitment to civic engagement can foster political participation and prepare students to become engaged and active members of society after graduation. Amy Widestrom’s article explores community influences on voter behavior and shows how the civic environment in which people live affects their attitudes toward political processes and participation in civic life. She offers recommendations about how political scientists and policy makers might empower citizens and build vibrant and active civic institutions in all neighborhoods, regardless of economic status.

Like voting, social capital and civic engagement are key indicators of democratic health, and low levels of both threaten the fabric of American democracy (Putnam 2001). Whereas data suggest that civic and political engagement may have declined and stagnated for decades, since November 2016, Americans seem to be increasingly paying attention to and getting involved in civic life. For example, on January 21, 2017, an estimated 4.2 million people peacefully protested in 654 Women’s Marches across the United States, making it the largest protest in American history (Pressman and Chenoweth 2017). A survey conducted during the Women’s March on Washington identified a high number of first-time marchers and also found that 56% of the marchers had not

(Hefling 2017; Wheeler and Shelbourne 2017); charitable giving has surged to unprecedented heights (Itkowitz 2016); and thousands attended rallies to protect the Affordable Care Act, protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, and stand against the travel ban. In this symposium, Michael Heaney examines the ways in which contemporary activism has become politically polarized. He identifies the opportunities and challenges this presents for activists seeking to build majoritarian social movements.

Americans’ distrust in institutions extends to the press and information provided by conventional news outlets. In the early 1990s, 56% of Americans had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the press; this percentage dropped to 23% in the 2010s (World Values Survey 1981–2014). In another large-scale representative survey, only 22% of American adults reported having “a lot” of confidence in information provided by local news organizations, and only 18% reported “a lot” of confidence in national news organizations. Notably, fully 74% of American adults believe the media is biased and “tends to favor one side when covering political and social issues” (Mitchell et al. 2016, 8).

Distrust of the media combined with the proliferation of “fake news” complicates our job as educators because we now must contend with and offer correctives to a context of misinformation, skepticism, and competing interpretations of reality. It is heartening to note that despite the spread of fake news and anti-intellectual rhetoric, Americans generally continue to hold positive views of universities. Recent data suggest that 62.6% of Americans have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in universities (World Values Survey 1981–2014). This data point suggests that whereas the public is skeptical of information provided by the media, universities could fill the information gap. Joshua Busby’s article explores how political scientists can respond to the proliferation of fake news by using social-media platforms to inform and engage the public. He promotes an ethos of cross-ideological conversation through online engagement in the form of blogs and social-media posts on platforms including Facebook and Twitter.

In seeking to deepen understandings of politics, democracy, and citizenship, political science provides the tools to analyze and address these trends. Indeed, the study of political science is informed by long-standing questions about power,

freedom, justice, and equality, which entails a systematic but also critical examination of institutions and processes of governments and governance. Victor (2016) argues convincingly that political scientists are “the scholars who can most lucidly understand the relationships between institutions, behaviors, and policy outcomes.” She urges political scientists to revisit

when he or she feels forgotten” (Wiesel 1999). In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lamented the complacency of the white moderate, who held greater devotion to order than justice and who distanced one’s self from the injustices taking place in other American communities (King 1963). In this spirit, the authors of this

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disciplinary norms regarding public engagement and to rally to protect the core institutions of constitutional, republican democracy. To do so does not require suspension of the scientific method or objectivity; rather, it recognizes that most political scientists value the preservation of democracy (Victor 2016).

In this vein, Alison Brysk’s article describes how a generation of human-rights scholarship can guide political scientists in responding to an increasingly illiberal and conflicted world. She challenges political scientists as dual citizens—of their country and of the republic of letters—to “speak rights to power” by disseminating the lessons of global history, fostering support for democratic movements, and deepening civic education within and beyond the academy. Finally, in their article, Bidisha Biswas and Shirin Deylami explain how questioning dominant paradigms and promoting a pedagogy of margins challenges students to actively practice critical thinking outside of their preestablished frames of reference. The goal is to equip students to become critical consumers of information and empathetic global citizens while simultaneously broadening their sociocultural perspectives and strengthening their conceptual knowledge of politics.

The articles in this symposium share a commitment to campus and community engagement as well as to a common understanding among their authors that there is no conflict between maintaining the intellectual credibility of our discipline and engaging the public sphere—a view that we recognize is not uncontested. We suggest that being nonpartisan is not the same as being apolitical. It is possible—and perhaps even necessary—for political scientists to maintain rigorous ethical and intellectual standards and still engage in applied politics. Indeed, disseminating research about how to improve the functioning of political institutions and preparing citizens to be effective political participants comprise a core objective of political science (APSA 2017).

In 2017, college campuses in the United States, like American society at large, are threatened by a cynical understanding of politics that feeds off fear and fosters division. Just as menacing is the threat of indifference to the fear, pain, and despair of so many Americans, particularly the most marginalized groups in our society. Social science research shows that being a bystander normalizes human-rights abuses and makes resistance to abuse more difficult (Staub 1989; Thalhammer et al. 2007). Elie Wiesel warned that indifference “always benefits the aggressor and never his victim—whose pain is magnified

symposium suggest that it is incumbent on political scientists to refuse to be indifferent to the political contestations of our time. Instead, the role of the political scientist should include safeguarding democratic institutions, promoting civic engagement, advancing shared values of equality and justice, and protecting those most at risk of having their rights violated or their freedoms revoked.

We offer a toolbox for applied action created by political scientists for political scientists who are struggling with how to effectively engage our students, our communities, and the American public at large. We imagine that not all political scientists will agree with the arguments and suggestions advanced here and some even may object to the underlying premise of the symposium—that political scientists have a responsibility to publicly engage. As such, we hope that this symposium marks a beginning rather than an ending of an important conversation about institutional values and practices of our discipline. We invite conversation. We welcome dissent. Perhaps most important, we encourage engagement rather than indifference.

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