

Political Science for the Curious: Why Study Political Science

“Political Science and Its Study at Marquette University”

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What is Political Science?

Political science is the systematic study of politics, including both international relations and domestic politics in countries around the world. To understand everything from protests, revolutions, coups, peaceful regime transitions, elections, and significant policy reforms to wars, terrorist attacks, international treaties, and humanitarian interventions can be a real challenge. Political science students learn about major concepts and theories that allow them to organize and make sense of the many causes and consequences of these kinds of political outcomes. They also study decision-making and details about the people – leaders and members of the general public alike – who make political decisions. Understanding such decisions also requires political science students and scholars to pay careful attention to the social, economic, and political structures in which political decisions take place.

Focusing on the role of individuals and the settings in which individual and collective political activities occur allows students to tackle the ultimate goal of the study of political science: developing the ability to understand and explain major political outcomes. Even when a political event or policy result takes place in a country students do not know much about, political science gives them the tools to know what questions to ask, where to look to get a sense of the important information they need, and what existing theories to consider as they work to understand that outcome.

What Are the Career Opportunities Like for Political Science Majors?

Because politics touches on so many aspects of economic activity, social relations, and daily life, developing the ability to understand it opens doors to careers in the wide-ranging areas of government, law, business, advocacy, and service just to name a few. We often say that it is easier to list the jobs you *cannot* do with a political science degree than all of the ones you can. As we look ahead, our increasingly multicultural society and ever more interconnected world mean that politics will only continue to grow in importance.

Undergraduates also benefit from political science's focus on research and writing skills and critical thinking abilities. Learning to assess and take apart a problem, to weigh alternative explanations and prescriptions, and to put together your own answer to that problem gives students a set of skills that can be applied to many occupations. Indeed, a number of our undergraduate majors and graduate students go on to work in fields that only somewhat touch on politics. These include positions in banking, media, communications, and research.

At the graduate level, whether through a master's program or Ph.D. studies, students get to take their research, analysis, and writing abilities to a higher level. They investigate interesting questions with answers that affect pressing social issues, and they conduct scholarly research based on and the collection and analysis of primary source data. Although many who earn their Ph.D. in political science go on to teach at universities, the research skills developed at the graduate level make such individuals increasingly attractive to important research institutes, think tanks, and advocacy organizations.

Practitioners and Political Science

It is often said that practitioners (non-academics/industry professionals) are generally not very interested in taking advantage of academic research in Political Science. This is a real problem, and it poses important challenges and opportunities to both practitioners and to political scientists. It is true that, sometimes at least, political scientists conduct research that seems to lack relevance to those practitioners working in the "front lines" of policy creation. For a long time, the American Political Science Association has been encouraging its members to engage in research that is more "policy relevant." Many of the best political science researchers have heeded this call, and there has been improvement in this area. Political scientists are increasingly involved in collaborative work with government officials, community service associations, the business sector, and international organizations.

It is also true that, without trying too hard to read research articles and scholarly books by leading political scientists, many practitioners have assumed political science research is irrelevant to their work. I find that strange. In nearly every profession, workers are encouraged to learn about their field, what works and doesn't work, and how it might be improved. Those working in the arena of politics can certainly benefit from the research of those who study and teach about politics for a living.

Political Science at Marquette University

The faculty of Marquette's Department of Political Science work on a wide variety of topics and study all parts of the world. We have a number of professors interested in political economy (the intersection of politics and economics), while many others focus on important public policy debates on topics that include urban life, national and global health care, welfare state protections, and the treatment of minorities and other socially marginalized groups. Several of our professors study the United States, seeking a deeper and often historically informed understanding of the development of modern American politics. We also have a strong commitment to political philosophy – the focused reflection on normative questions of how best to organize society, craft political institutions, and use (or limit) political power. Throughout all of these endeavors, we work to connect our scholarship to the practical concerns of how contemporary politics shapes the lives of those around us.

Examples of My Research and Interesting Findings from It

Like many people who work in the part of political science known as comparative politics, I have both thematic interests (democratization, nationalism, and research methods) and a regional interest (the post-Communist region, particularly the Baltic States and Ukraine). I look for topics and specific research questions that fall at the intersection of my thematic interests and allow me to pursue the answers to these questions by examining the post-Communist cases. Much of my initial research, for example, examined the citizenship policies of the Baltic States and Ukraine. I sought to understand the variation in how inclusive the policies were – i.e., how easy or difficult it was for ethnic minorities to become citizens. These studies pointed to the importance of identity-related factors, such as the extent to which the state was seen as a nation-state and the nation's membership boundaries were understood to coincide with the membership boundaries of the majority ethnic group. One of the surprising findings from this research was how effective European international organizations were at pressuring countries like Estonia and Latvia to make their policies more inclusive, while pressure from powerful neighbors like Russia tended to have a negative effect if any at all. I have also studied the impact of regional divides within mass attitudes in countries like Ukraine. This kind of research can provide a useful context for trying to understand topics like the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Scholarship Opportunities for Domestic & International Students at Marquette University

Marquette University works hard to provide as much financial support to its domestic and international students as possible. It also makes bringing international students to campus a priority. We have a very good Office of International Education, whose staff works closely with international students to facilitate their transition to university life. There are also many scholarship opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students from other countries. As a result, our university is home to hundreds of international students from around 70 countries. Historically, 90% of our international students have received scholarship support.

At the graduate level, financial aid offers mostly come from the individual graduate programs themselves. Both domestic and international graduate students can apply for research assistantships (which include partial or full tuition coverage and a stipend) or tuition scholarships. We have had a number of very good international students in our programs over the last several decades, many of whom held research assistantships. We value their perspectives, experiences, and approaches to the topics we study in our graduate programs. Our students from the United States, and our many professors who work closely with the students in our graduate programs, benefit from the presence of international students in our program.

Final Thoughts

At good universities in the United States, political science students are pushed to go beyond memorizing facts. Learning the political, social, and economic details about different countries is interesting and allows a student to better understand those countries. It is even more important, however, for students to ask good questions and attack the process of answering those questions through careful study and a commitment to developing critical thinking skills. If students only learn facts, they have not developed the ability to apply those facts. Even worse, if students acquire factual knowledge that merely confirms what they already believe, it is doubtful they have learned how to answer the truly important questions about politics, economics, and society. The best political science students – and the ones who are the most successful at whatever they choose to do after college – are those who listen to, take seriously, and really try to understand the arguments of people with whom they disagree. Helping students reach that point is one of the most rewarding parts of what I do as a political science professor.