Creating an APSA "Exploring Public Issues" Speakers and Classroom Resources Program

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This article proposes that the American Political Science Association (APSA) create an "Exploring Public Issues" program to assist libraries, museums, community organizations, and schools in finding political science speakers and classroom resources that articulate different perspectives on important public issues in an engaging manner. Although the program would not be especially high profile, if it succeeded, it might be a significant help in building appreciation and support for the political science profession over time. Many of the scholars who created the discipline of political science in the early twentieth century hoped that it would become a venue through which academic works and their creators would directly inform governmental policy making, as in Germany (Ross 1991). However, as historians from Richard Hofstadter to Daniel Rodgers have shown, many Americans have always been wary of being governed by intellectuals, especially left-leaning intellectuals (perhaps for good reason) (Hofstadter 1996; Rodgers 1998). This long-standing feature of American life today is compounded by a highly polarized political climate and mounting criticism of higher education in general, including President Obama's demand that colleges and universities prove they are worth their high price tags. As a result, engagement with the American public in ways that can increase esteem and support for the work of political scientists may need to include what can be perceived as a revival of John Dewey's conception of the social science vocation (Dewey 1934). That conception calls for regular, direct, grassroots democratic engagement with and service to many groups in many communities, in ways that can gradually heighten appreciation for the value of political science in American life.

More specifically, there are at least four reasons why the enhanced local engagement that an APSA "Exploring Public Issues" program would provide is advisable, as follows:

1. Although research on the topic is minimal, experience suggests that much of the public does not have a clear sense of what political science is or what political scientists do. Relatively few people think of political science as generating useful insights on public issues. Many of those who do have a sense of the discipline suspect that political scientists advance only predictable liberal positions. Consequently, they do not view the discipline as a resource for their own understanding of politics or as a means to solve public problems. Change in this regard is likely to take more than an improvement in the discipline's presence in the national media or more accessible scholarship. In time, the public perception of political science may improve if political scientists come to be regarded throughout the country as convenient, cooperative sources of interesting, informative, and diverse perspectives on important public matters.
2. The widespread dissatisfaction with severe polarization in American politics has resulted in much of the public wanting to hear and to participate in thoughtful civil discussions in which different viewpoints are well represented. I have attended various events in Philadelphia hosted by liberal, conservative, and officially nonpartisan organizations in recent years. I have found that audiences are inclined to appreciate programs simply because proponents of contrasting perspectives engaged with one another in courteous, thoughtful, and informative discussion. If political scientists were perceived as regularly assisting Americans to communicate constructively across ideological divides, there might be less political opposition to their support.
3. It also is likely that many in the American public place greater value on the contributions that political scientists make as teachers (and, admittedly, credential awarders) of their children than they assign to our contributions as research scholars. Schools and teachers throughout the country also have rapidly increasing capacities to utilize video and other electronic media in instruction, with the accompanying desire for valuable media to present. If timely, high-quality classroom resources generated by political scientists became a more visible and frequent part of K–12 and higher education coursework, more American parents might accept that the contributions of political science are essential to modern education.
4. Public libraries, museums, community groups, and schools are receptive to hosting events that feature speakers or, in more remote regions, video resources on public issues, and they often are adept at attracting community audiences. As newspapers on both coasts report, libraries are being transformed dramatically, becoming "bustling community centers" with rising numbers of visitors—including attendees at events that focus on contemporary political issues (Seelye 2014). For example, in 2005, public meeting rooms at the Bellevue, Washington, Library hosted more than 500 different groups and sometimes more than 300 meetings a month (Valdes 2007). In 2012, the Urban Libraries Council—an association of more than 130 public libraries in the United States and Canada serving 190 million people—issued a report titled *Civic Engagement: Stepping up to the Civic Engagement Challenge* that, citing Robert Putnam, explicitly called for libraries to host many more "conversation-starter" events on public issues (Urban Libraries Council 2012). The libraries are joined by a multitude of other types of organizations—from public and private historical museums to business associations to religious bodies to civic-service groups—that seek to sustain participation by occasionally offering programs on political topics.

However, most libraries, museums, and civic groups want the discussions they present to be civil, accessible, reasonably

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entertaining, and fairly representative of different viewpoints on issues that are likely held by different segments of their community. As the Urban Libraries Council stated in its report, "Ensuring balanced perspectives among presenters will facilitate a balanced conversation"(Urban Libaries Council 2012, 21–22). Many organizations believe that as long as they are not unduly polemical, programs that feature effective proponents of different viewpoints will be most compelling for their audiences. If the APSA were perceived as an accessible contact point to locate speakers and videos as resources for events and classroom teaching, the result might be an expanded civil-society network of organizations and leaders who regard the political science profession as a major asset to their endeavors.

The APSA also should encourage event organizers and teachers to report when they have recruited APSA-listed speakers for upcoming events so that the association can assist in advertising those events (as discussed later in this article). Organizers and audience members also should be encouraged and assisted in providing the APSA with feedback on events that include association speakers. This could include online scale ratings and anonymous comments (e.g., similar to how Amazon.com encourages site visitors to rate posted book reviews and many political-discussion sites encourage the rating of previous posts, moving popular ones to the front of the website). Although there is an obvious need for discretion, it might be possible for the APSA to use this feedback to signal to future groups that particular speakers—or, preferably,

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THE PROPOSAL

An APSA "Exploring Public Issues" program could contain many features; however, the association is limited by finite administrative capacities. Nevertheless, at least some of the suggestions that follow would not require a major expenditure of time or money; if the program succeeds, resources could be found for its expansion.[1]

The core of the program is based on the APSA compiling and frequently updating the following two inventories: APSA Speakers List and APSA Classroom Video Resource List.

APSA Speakers List

An APSA Speakers List could provide names, locations, and contact information for political scientists who are willing to speak at public events on specified issues, often joined by another political scientist with a different perspective. To compile this list, the APSA could include a brief survey in its annual online membership-renewal form. Members would be asked if they want to be listed on the APSA "Exploring Public Issues" Speakers List; which issues (from a specified number, with write-ins permitted) they want to discuss; and how they would characterize their viewpoint on a right–left continuum, with space to indicate "other."[2] Members also could contact APSA staff directly to be placed on the list.

The APSA Speakers List would be created by compiling and presenting the survey results by geographical region and issues, so that groups and individuals seeking speakers on a particular topic could identify those political scientists in their area with pertinent expertise, as well as a sense of their viewpoint. The Speakers List could suggest that organizers and teachers invite political scientists with different viewpoints. In time, certain political scientists might become recurring pairs that could be specified as such on the list.

For these pairings to flourish and for the program to work more generally, the political science speakers would need to develop an ethos of helping the public understand both sides of contrasting viewpoints rather than seeking to win public debates. combinations of speakers—in their region have been well received in the past.

APSA Classroom Video Resources List

An APSA Classroom Video Resources List could be compiled in at least two ways. First, the APSA could ask organizers and teachers if presentations by political scientists will be video recorded and if the association can receive an electronic file. Both original participants and subsequent users of a video would be asked to rate it. In time, the APSA could develop a considerable inventory of highly rated videos. Organizations that are remote from appropriate live speakers might find all or part of the videos to be useful components in their own events. They also might be valuable classroom resources for teachers.

Second, many scholars (this author included) are preparing video lectures for different purposes. Some are involved in massive open online courses or other online-learning programs. Other scholars already are regular speakers for different public groups, which obtain (or could obtain) videos of their appearances. In my case, I chose to put my weekly constitutional-law lectures on videos, thereby devoting class time to structured discussions of different viewpoints on constitutional issues. This is facilitated by the use of PowerPoint polling for an anonymous sense of the range of student opinion on controversial topics and how opinions sometimes shift after discussion. The University of Pennsylvania has a new initiative called Structured Active In-Class Learning (SAIL) that seeks to generate more such courses, believing that they can improve student outcomes. Other institutions are undertaking similar experiments.

Not all of the videos, of course, would be of wide value as classroom resources (e.g., mine are related to course readings and discussions in ways that limit their utility). However, some might work as an overview of major recent constitutional decisions. Nevertheless, the APSA could ask members to make available videos about particular issues that they consider suitable for general use and that they are willing to have in the public domain. Again, members should be asked but not

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required to indicate whether they regard their presentations on the topics discussed as leaning more toward conservative, liberal, or "other." It may be necessary in some cases to obtain approval from a political scientist's institution for this use. However, the videos often are already available on YouTube and other sites; therefore, access is not technically difficult for teachers and civic groups. The challenge is in discovering their existence—a need that the APSA's Classroom Video Resources List could meet.

The APSA could prepare a list of videos categorized by topics and speakers, indicating (where permitted) whether a video presents a more conservative or a more liberal stance on a particular issue. Again, the APSA could encourage organizers to select videos that represent different viewpoints, and it could use continuing feedback to update ratings for subsequent users.

Community-service and civic clubs including Rotary and Lions clubs, church groups, labor unions, and patriotic societies are venues for presentations and discussions of public issues.

ADVERTISING THE APSA "EXPLORING PUBLIC ISSUES" SPEAKERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES PROGRAM

For this program to succeed, various institutions, community groups, and schools must be aware of its existence on a continuing basis. That requirement could unduly burden APSA administrative capacities; however, after the program is set up, much of the work could be routinized and therefore not be very time-consuming. Nevertheless, it is likely that an APSA staff person would need to administer the program. Experience would determine the percentage of the staff person's time required on an ongoing basis.

The core responsibilities would be first to update the speaker and resource lists to ensure that the information is easily accessible on the APSA website. Second, the program's administrator must prepare and distribute electronic and possibly print information about the program to appropriate recipients on a recurring basis.

To identify the appropriate recipients of this information, at least two more lists should be compiled. The first consists of contact information for institutions and organizations that might host speakers or use video resources. The American Library Association is the nation's largest and oldest of its kind, and there are many other similar but more specialized organizations (e.g., the Chinese American Library Association and the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking).[3] As in the case of the Urban Libraries Council members, many of these institutions regularly host well-attended discussion series devoted to public issues. The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia is one of many historical museums—public and private—around the country that frequently host public events pertinent to their themes to heighten their visibility and contribute to civic education. Most are members of the American Alliance of Museums, which includes all types of museums and most state and regional museum associations.[4]

The American Association for State and Local History also works with a range of volunteer-run museums around the country, many with similar interests.[5] There also are many nonprofit foundations, including the Civil Rights Foundation in Los Angeles and the Freedoms Foundation of Valley Forge, that provide distinctive civic-education programs but that occasionally might find APSA videos and speakers to be useful resources.[6] Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and former US Representative Lee Hamilton head the advisory council of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a "coalition of over 70 national civic learning, education, civic engagement and business groups" seeking to improve civic learning in America's schools.[7] Most of these groups—and, undoubtedly, many more not yet identified—have programming that an APSA Speakers' List and Classroom Video Resources List could assist.

Furthermore, as scholars of American politics from Tocqueville to Putnam have argued, Americans belong to a diversity of associations with a sense of civic mission, even if they are less omnipresent than they once were. The APSA's civic education website formerly listed some of these organizations, and this listing can be revived and expanded.[8] Not only do groups such as the American Bar Association and the League of Women Voters have civic-education and civic-engagement programs; community-service and civic clubs including Rotary and Lions clubs, church groups, labor unions, and patriotic societies are venues for presentations and discussions of public issues. Political scientists regularly appear at these events; however, hard-pressed event planners may appreciate accessible, up-to-date information about speakers on specific topics that represent a range of views and are available in their geographic area.

Teachers around the country, moreover, are eager to find videos for classroom use; to take their classes to public events pertinent to what they are teaching; and to invite speakers to their school and classroom. They are organized in related associations, including the United Federation of Teachers' Association of Teachers of Social Studies, the American Federation of Teachers' Classroom Resources Initiative on Human Rights and Civic Engagement, and the AP Comparative Government and Politics and the US Government and Politics Teaching Communities, as well as state and local associations.[9] High school teachers contribute to the US Government Teachers Blog and the US History Teachers Blog, among other sites.[10]

All of these groups could receive periodic e-mails, tweets, and/or print announcements about the APSA "Exploring Public Issues" Program and its available resources. The program also could have a Facebook page and appear in other social media. If organizers report to the APSA that they are inviting APSA-listed speakers, and if the APSA has e-mail addresses for regional, state, and local teacher associations in the vicinity of the event, those groups also could be notified electronically about specific events. The APSA website, Facebook page, and other venues could include lists of upcoming events featuring APSA-listed speakers. Moreover, many teachers monitor tweets about events and curriculum with appropriate hashtags (e.g., #historyteacher, #history, and #socialstudies).[11] By tweeting about an upcoming event featuring

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an APSA-listed speaker, the association could produce extensive re-tweeting to benefit teachers, students, and event organizers. By taking advantage of modern media systems, widespread and continuing communication about APSA "Exploring Public Issues" events and resources can be achieved without requiring major resources—other than an admittedly considerable amount of a staff person's time.

CONCLUSION

If the administrative burden proves to be too great or if political scientists do not volunteer or perform well, the proposed APSA "Exploring Public Issues" Speakers and Classroom Resources Program certainly would fail. More attention must be given to questions of strategy, feasibility, and logistics than provided in this article. As in other human endeavors, financial issues must be confronted: whether speakers would receive honoraria; whether the APSA would charge a fee for the use of videos; and whether any funds received would be divided among the association, the speakers, the video producers, the home institutions, and any other claimants. The program would succeed best in gaining utilization and fostering goodwill if political scientists and the APSA donated their time and work. However, the APSA may need income to cover the program's costs. Furthermore, better-endowed groups (e.g., business organizations) regularly provide significant speaker's fees, which may discourage scholars from participating if APSA speakers were denied the same.

In whatever way the financial dimensions are handled, it seems likely that many institutions, civic organizations, and schools would have an interest in what such a program would offer, if it were done well and did not have an exorbitant cost. If it succeeded, there is reason to hope that, in time, the American public and the associational and political leaders would change their current perception of the political science profession to one that sees it as including different but knowledgeable and well-reasoned views on important issues, united by goals of better informing the public about them. This includes members of the public learning about views to which they are attracted as well as those that they are inclined to reject. The profession also may come to be perceived as an indispensable enricher and enlivener of many types of educational curricula at all levels. In locations around the country where these contributions become a routine part of the lived experience of most community members—and, ultimately, in the United States as a whole—political science may gain wider recognition as a profession that helps people to form their own political judgments and to contribute to self-governance in ways that are wiser and more effective than they would be without the discipline's contributions. ■

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NOTES

1. Preliminary discussion with APSA Executive Director Steven Rathgeb. Smith suggests that this initiative appears feasible enough to be worth exploring.
2. Although Theda Skocpol's recently formed Scholars Strategy Network does not attempt to represent all points of view, it provides a valuable compilation of political scientists with expertise and willingness to speak publicly on a wide range of issues. See Scholars Strategy Network: Research to Improve Policy and Enhance Democracy (available at www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org).
3. See, e.g., "ALAnews: Joint Statement from the Presidents of AILA, APALA, BCALA, CALA, REFORMA and ALA" (available at www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2014/03/joint-statement-presidents-aila-apala-bcala-cala-reforma-and-ala).
4. American Alliance of Museums, "About Us" (available at www.aam-us.org/about-us).
5. AASLH, "About" (available at http://about.aaslh.org).
6. See, e.g., Constitutional Rights Foundation (available at http://crf-usa.org) and Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge (available at www.freedomsfoundation.org). I currently serve on the board of the Freedoms Foundation.
7. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (available at www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign).
8. The former APSA list of civic-education organizations can be found at http://web.archive.org/web/20060208080551/http://www.apsanet.org/content_7501.cfm.
9. For pertinent websites, see Association of Teachers of Social Studies/UFT (available at www.uft.org/committees/atss); AFT "Classroom Resources" (available at www.aft.org/about/world/resources-opportunities/resources.cfm); and AP Teacher Communities (available at https://apcommunity.collegeboard.org), among others.
10. See, e.g., http://usgovteducatorsblog.blogspot.com and http://ushistoryeducatorblog.blogspot.com.
11. Sites listing these include www.teachthought.com/twitter-hashtags-for-teacher and www.cybraryman.com/edhashtags.html.

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