Engaging Political Science Alumni Networks

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Deepening political science's engagement with the broader public should entail outreach to groups that are likely to be interested in and receptive to political science but that do not include academic political scientists or traditional American Political Science Association (APSA) members. This article advocates for identifying and deepening our engagement with groups such as political science PhDs who are employed outside of the academy, political science majors who work on Capitol Hill or in other parts of the government, community-college instructors, and high school civics teachers. In one sense, there are many political science "alumni" who do not receive regular contact, communication, or resources from the APSA or other disciplinary bodies. Just as universities—and now many academic departments—seek to cultivate alumni networks, so should political scientists and the APSA. These networks will foster greater inclusiveness, and I hope that they will nurture different types of advocates for the discipline.

Part of improving the public engagement of political science involves defining that public. The audience for political science clearly includes journalists, policy makers, and interested laypeople who peruse op-eds and blog posts. My argument is that political science should extend its outreach to new audiences and, moreover, should seek to institutionalize that outreach through efforts by the APSA.

In general, the formal discipline of political science does its work in academic settings. Most APSA members have doctorates or master's degrees and are employed by colleges and universities.[1] The discipline's major meetings focus on the academic work of political scientists, including research and teaching. By contrast, those whose exposure to political science is not as intensive—as well as those whose exposure is intensive but who work outside of academia—have less reason to feel part of "political science," in terms of either psychological affinity or formal membership in the APSA. They arguably constitute political science alumni but they have relatively little contact with the discipline after their studies are completed.[2]

Among others, three groups provide examples of untapped alumni. The first group consists of teachers of high school civics and advanced-placement government courses. Many of these teachers may not have been formally trained in political science—through postsecondary or postgraduate work—but they must convey basic features of political systems as well as political science logic to their students. However, we know relatively little about what they want and do not have and how the APSA could address their needs.

A second group is composed of undergraduate political science majors who have graduated and now work in political fields. Although this group may be motivated by vocational rather than academic interests, it does have the potential—consciously or not—to draw on the ideas encountered in political science courses.

A third group includes those who earned doctorates in political science but are employed outside of academia—for example, in government, think-tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and private-sector companies. Some in this group continue to participate in disciplinary conferences, read political science research, teach in universities, and conduct research intended for disciplinary outlets. However, many have positions that are not as quasi-academic, and they are less likely to maintain contact with the discipline over time.

There are at least three reasons for the discipline of political science to reach out to these groups and others like them. The first reason is purely strategic. These people may work—particularly on Capitol Hill or in the executive branch—where they could advocate for the interests of academic political science (e.g., continued federal funding of political science research). These new audiences can be thought of as constituting political science "issue publics," to use Converse's (1964) formulation from "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." Political science research demonstrates that these groups are more likely to be informed about particular issues and more easily mobilized by related appeals.

A second reason to reach out is to allow the insights of political science research to penetrate beyond academia. Arguably, much of political science's public engagement—such as op-eds and blogs—already serves this goal and is reaching these groups and others. However, more engagement with them can help political science research to better enter the "bloodstream" of politics and policy. The discipline of political science has developed a credible knowledge base in many topics, but it can do more to derive insights that are relevant to different audiences. In an ideal world, effective public engagement means that some in these groups will consume political science research at least partly on their own, without the need for "translation" by political scientists in op-eds and blog posts.

A third reason is to allow the insights of these groups to inform and improve political science teaching and research. A common complaint both within and outside of political science is that it has lost touch with important trends and problems in the "real world." Even if this complaint often is overblown, it would enhance the discipline to strengthen connections with groups whose full-time employment focuses on these types of issues. Similarly, those who are tasked with teaching about politics and political science to younger students—who are in the relatively early stages of their political formation—can suggest not only new pedagogies but also avenues for research on topics such as political socialization.

One way to build a broader and more inclusive network of political science alumni is through collaboration between the APSA and political science departments. The APSA already has experience with the basic logistics of membership creation and renewal. It also serves as the primary means by which information about the discipline, including research in its flagship

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journals, circulates among political scientists. Moreover, the APSA is well positioned to reach out to groups such as civic teachers, perhaps by attending relevant conferences and meetings or by disseminating information to secondary schools. If the APSA were to send representatives to conferences, it might consider recruiting scholars who can serve as effective ambassadors for the discipline. By engaging with civics teachers, for example, these ambassadors could include political scientists involved with the APSA's programs on teaching and learning.

Political science departments could help identify and recruit these alumni, which is not an insignificant challenge. The three groups described in this article alone currently constitute many thousands of people and, with each passing year, there are more. Both academic departments and universities have the capacity to keep track of their own alumni and conceivably could share information with the APSA. My own department, for example, recently redoubled its efforts to communicate with political science majors after they graduate by developing a mailing list of several thousand alumni who receive a regular newsletter. Departments are better equipped to keep track of doctoral students, who are fewer in number.

There also are advantages in this arrangement for academic departments. If the APSA were to provide lists of alumni who subsequently joined the association, then those who might represent the department in official or unofficial capacities could be identified. Moreover, departmental alumni who later join the APSA are potentially more likely than other alumni to support the department in terms of money and time.

It is important to note the challenges that these efforts will encounter. It will be difficult or impossible to identify and/or contact many members of these and other groups of political science alumni. Undoubtedly, many will not be interested in information about political science. Typical undergraduate students who choose to major in political science likely do not intend to follow political science for the rest their career. Thus, there will be an inevitable learning process for the APSA in terms of what political science alumni want or need—that is, information about new research, strategies for teaching politics and government, events that they can attend, and so on.

In an ideal world, effective public engagement means that some in these groups will consume political science research at least partly on their own, without the need for "translation" by political scientists in op-eds and blog posts.

However, the goal is not to produce a census of former political science undergraduates or doctorates and then convince them to become life members of the APSA. The goal instead is more modest: to communicate with many of these alumni with the knowledge that some will respond positively. As a result, political science networks will become more robust and diverse, which likely will make the discipline stronger as well.

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NOTES

1. In 2004, data compiled by the APSA showed that only 2% of current, active, nonstudent members were employed by nonacademic institutions (www.apsanet.org/imgtest/APSAdata.pdf).
2. Arthur Lupia reports that the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) is considering a similar endeavor: changing its model of service and pricing to attract what it calls "citizen scientists"—that is, people who work in science-related fields but who are not currently members of the AAAS.

REFERENCE

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