



## ESSAYS

# WHY I'M LEAVING THE POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

AUGUST 29, 2017 | BRUCE GILLEY | LEAVE A COMMENT

Looking forward to a lively annual conference of the American Political Science Association, due to start this week in San Francisco, I proposed a panel on "Viewpoint Diversity in Political Science." After all, I thought, wasn't the 2016 election a signal lesson in the continuing relevance of diverse viewpoints in the American body politic?

My submission featured four of the most prominent political scientists in the country who have written on the issue of political diversity in the field. They included Joshua Dunn, Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, whose co-authored 2016 book entitled *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University* has been a focus of the national discussion among academics interested in the issue; and April Kelly-Woessner, Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Legal Studies at Elizabethtown College, whose co-authored 2011 book *The Still Divided Academy: How Competing Visions of Power Politics and Diversity Complicate the Mission of Higher Education* is the gold standard on how to promote respectful political dialogue on campus.

### Quaint Notions of White Identity?

Now, granted, every major conference receives far more submissions than it can accept. Still, I was surprised when the panel was rejected. I assumed that it had been bested by superior panels submitted to the jointly-organized teaching and education sections of the conference. But when the official program came out, I could see that it was not. Instead, it was crowded out by APSA's serious lack of political diversity.

A total of 11 full panels or roundtables were accepted in the teaching and education sections. Of these, 7 are on mainstream teaching topics. Another 4 were set aside for, shall we say, more politicized topics. One, entitled "Let's Talk about Sex (and Gender and Sexuality)", is on how to restructure the classroom around ideas of being "genderfluid, transgender, or gender

nonconforming." Another, on "Tolerance, Diversity, and Assessment" will focus on how to use administrative coercion to enforce various group identity agendas.

The third, called "Taking Advantage of Diversity," will help scholars to understand why their quaint notions of cutting edge knowledge are merely expressions of white identity. Another, "Teaching Trump", is composed of left-wing feminist scholars. Final score for political science education at this year's APSA conference: left-wing approaches to diversity and difference: 4; conservative or classical liberal approaches: 0.

### **The Holy Trinity of Leftist Grievance**

For good measure, I looked at the entire conference program to see whether the preponderance of panels on left-wing approaches to diversity in the teaching and education sections was to balance a lack of them elsewhere. I searched for panels on the holy trinity of identity politics: sexism/feminism, racism/white privilege, and sexual orientation/homo/transphobia. My best guess is that conference attendees will have a choice of 104 panels on these topics, in addition to the 4 in the teaching and learning sections. Just for laughs, I searched for panels on political, ideological, or viewpoint diversity. None.

There are, of course, special sections controlled by conservative or classical liberal groups at the APSA conference. But as for the sections that are open to all submissions, they essentially fall into two groups: strictly empirical work or normatively left-wing ideas. Am I the only one scratching my head?

I have worked with political scientists of an overwhelmingly left-wing bent for all of my career, so I know that there is nothing nefarious in this. Indeed, this is a key finding of Dunn's *Passing on the Right*. Sometimes, conservative commentators on the academy write as if there is a vast conspiracy operating on campus. There is not. Most of my left-wing colleagues in political science are reasonable and rational people who are aware of the importance of bringing a variety of political viewpoints into the classroom. When I asked the section organizer why our panel was rejected, she genuinely seemed not to remember – not indicative of an intentional censoring of non-left-wing issues – and added: "I agree it's an important topic."

So why the lack of balance? Despite the lip-service to the importance of viewpoint diversity, asking an APSA organizer committed to the advance of left-wing viewpoints to take one for the right is like asking a glutton to forego ice cream. There are no practical means to translate theory into practice. The eyes roll tiredly over proposals concerning viewpoint diversity but perk up excitedly at the sight of one, to cite another of the offerings at this year's conference, "Disavowing Violence: Imperial Entitlements, From Burke to Trump (Fuck That Guy)."

### **Looniest End of the Academy**

Indeed, for the looniest end of the left-wing academy, even the theory is hostile to viewpoint diversity. They view the academy as a special zone of (left-wing) Truth that must be protected against (right-wing) Falsehoods of the real world. Genuine pluralism, from this vantage, is a cover for privilege and oppression. Why import such falsehoods into the charmed realm of truth they have carved out with taxpayer's money? Or more to the point, why go through the pain, inconvenience, and potential disapprobation of importing falsehoods? I do not think the teaching and education section leaders of this year APSA were of that sort. But the system is heavily stacked against even a brief effort in the direction of idea pluralism. Why stick your neck out to accept a panel on political diversity at a political science conference when, to cite another of this year's offerings, one can win kudos for accepting a panel entitled: "Pussies Grab Back: Feminism in the Wake of Trump"?

Much has been written about the general problem of a lack of political diversity in political science and its drift to the far left. The ratio of Democratic/left-of-center to Republican/right-of-center professors in political science is variously estimated at around 15 to 1 nationwide, not counting moderates and centrist independents. In my home state of Oregon, I believe the ratio is infinitely large because I do not know of a single Republican or conservative in our profession here (I am a swing voter and

independent). APSA is not only indicative of this worsening problem but, and here is the issue, a key cause of it and thus, potentially, a fulcrum point for change.

It was not always this way. APSA was founded in 1903 to defend the ideal of impartial empirical inquiry. Its constitution still declares that “the Association as such is nonpartisan. It will not support political parties or candidates. It will not commit its members on questions of public policy nor take positions not immediately concerned with its direct purpose” of academic inquiry. For years, it upheld those ideals. Remarkably, APSA and political science more generally survived the onslaught of illiberal radicalism, political correctness, and censorship of the 1960s, as John Gunnell of SUNY-Albany wrote in the association’s main journal in 2006. APSA presidents well after that era included prominent conservatives like Samuel Huntington of Harvard (1986-7) and James Q. Wilson of UCLA (1991-2).

The real problems arose when the graduate students of the 1960s and 1970s became tenured faculty and APSA executives. While political science and APSA were able to withstand an assault on academic freedom and viewpoint diversity from illiberal students, they had no means to defend themselves when those illiberal students became the governors. From the 2000s, a string of such far-left scholars came into office as APSA presidents: they included old-left scholars of class and socialism like Theda Skocpol of Harvard (served in 2002-3), Margaret Levi of Washington (served in 2004-5), and Ira Katznelson of Columbia (served in 2005-6); and “new-left” scholars of racial and gender grievance such as Dianne Pinderhughes of Notre Dame (2007-8), Rodney Hero of Berkeley (2014-15), and Jennifer Hochschild of Harvard (2015-16). There is of course nothing wrong with a variety of positions being represented in the APSA presidency. However, there was never any countervailing tendency. The moderate leftists who took the helm between the growing frequency of radicals could do nothing more than steady the ship before the next gale of fanaticism.

Under this new post-2000 leadership, APSA turned from being a fairly pluralistic and professional-oriented body into a shock force for the latest thought liberations of the left. This has been evident most clearly in the bevy of special task forces that have been commissioned. One of these, on “Inequality and American Democracy” published in 2004, deserves special attention because it was the point where APSA lost its credibility. The report claimed to have uncovered “profound threats” to American democracy as a result of inequality, which was reinforced by social programs that served mainly old white conservatives; indeed that political scientists had reached a “consensus” that such a threat existed. Again, it was not the radical leftism per se but the growing suggestion that only radical viewpoints were welcome or even recognized in the discipline that rankled.

### **A Little Diversity? No Thanks**

One political scientist, Robert Weissberg of the University of Illinois-Urbana, was allowed a dissenting voice in a symposium on the report. He called the report a “professional embarrassment” for its hysterical claims of what he called “an AARP coup d’état.” Putting aside the possibility that “overeager interns absconded with APSA letterhead,” Weissberg warned that professional political scientists who adopted an “overheated radical egalitarian tone” of the report were not just, in his view, getting it wrong on American democracy. The bigger problem was what it said about the state of APSA. The obliviousness of the report’s authors to what a conservative, classical liberal or centrist would see as its “embedded totalitarianism” might have been at least acknowledged if the 14-member task force had included one or two non-leftists. “A little diversity, so to speak, would have saved considerable embarrassment.”

Yet such diversity was, as it was becoming clear in 2004, precisely what was on the wane at APSA. The new generation of political science faculty and APSA leaders no longer saw their role not as engendering an appreciation and curiosity about the pluralism of the American body politic and its institutions (as well as those abroad). Instead, APSA had become a key citadel to storm and capture: “Transforming a discipline’s intellectual center of gravity is not rocket science once the administrative apparatus is secure,” Weissberg wrote.

Today, APSA has become barely distinguishable from the Democratic Party and its far-left wing. Its web page runs a constant stream of anti-Trump or anti-Republican news. This year, it issued a statement supporting the anti-Trump “March for Science”

held in DC in April and another against the Executive Order on a temporary ban for travelers from several Middle Eastern countries. It also felt the need to issue a Letter to Members after the 2016 election (there was no letter issued after the 2012 or 2008 elections) saying the election had “cast into sharp relief an array of issues” for political scientists. I used to think that’s what elections were supposed to do.

Of course, for political scientists for whom every professional endeavor is a pitched battle for social justice waged against the dark forces of tradition and privilege, the takeover of APSA is just another point on the road to total victory. But, like Saigon when the Vietcong arrived, they may find that others have abandoned the city, leaving them with nothing but a Pyrrhic Victory.

The “boat people” fleeing APSA now include me. As it happened, this year’s APSA was on the theme of political legitimacy, one of my major research areas. I proposed a methods workshop on measuring legitimacy along with another scholar who, like me, has spent a lot of time on data and measurement issues. It was accepted, but alas is now canceled as I have chosen not to attend. I will continue to research, teach, and engage policy-makers about legitimacy, but not at APSA.

Maybe this does not matter. As Weissberg noted: “Transforming the profession into scholarly agitprop is lamentable, but hardly catastrophic in the grand scheme of things. At worst, intellectual corruption will render APSA publicly irrelevant.”

But for that shrinking pool of political scientists for whom a vibrant and pluralistic professional association still matters, it may be time for a reckoning. So here is my challenge: make “political and viewpoint diversity” the theme for a future APSA annual conference. Recognizing the problem is the first step on the road to recovery.



Bruce Gilley is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Ph.D. Program in Public Affairs and Policy at the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University, and President of the Oregon Association of Scholars. His research centers on comparative and international politics and public policy. His work covers issues as diverse as democracy, climate change, political legitimacy, and international conflict. He is a specialist on the politics of China and Asia.

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