

### Current Performance and Future Strength of Political Science

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## CURRENT PERFORMANCE AND FUTURE STRENGTH OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BOB REINALDA

**Abstract (Current Performance and Future Strength of Political Science):** The article and its five propositions question the current performance and future strength of political science as a discipline. Its empirics are based on the book series 'The World of Political Science', published between 2006 and 2012, on the development and current state of the various sub-disciplines, asking the question of 'why we are where we are' in political science. The topics discussed in the first section on the discipline's actual strength are the relationship between the United States, Europe and the rest of the world, the advances and challenges of the discipline, and the issue of fragmentation and specialization. The second section addresses the relevance of political science to society and politics and the third the impact of current politics on the discipline. The text was presented at a preparatory conference in Helsinki in December 2013 and will be further discussed during a special round-table session at the International Political Science Association's world congress in Montreal in July 2014. The propositions are intended to trigger debate among political scientists.

**Keywords:** political science discipline; fragmentation; excessive specialization; relevance to society; impact of politics; political science associations; Bologna Process.

This article and its five propositions question the current performance and future strength of political science as a discipline. Its empirics are based on a book series, published between 2006 and 2012, on the development and current state of the various sub-disciplines, asking the question of 'why we are where we are' in political science. The topics discussed in the first section on the discipline's actual strength are the relationship between the United States (US), Europe and the rest of the world, the advances and challenges of the discipline, and the issue of fragmentation and specialization. The second section addresses the relevance of political science to society and politics and the third the impact of current politics on the discipline. The text was presented at a preparatory conference in Helsinki in December 2013 and will be further discussed during a special round-table session at the International Political Science Association's world congress in Montreal in July 2014. The propositions are intended to trigger debate among political scientists.

### The Book Series ‘The World of Political Science’

At the world congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in 2000 Michael Stein and John Trent of the IPSA Research Committee 33 (on the state of the discipline) invited the chairs of the other research committees to convene panels on the topic of the development and current state of their respective sub-disciplines within political science, asking the question of ‘why we are where we are in political science’. They also initiated a book series designed to represent prevailing global professional opinion among political scientists on the historical development and current state of the discipline at the beginning of the millennium. They hoped that by providing sub-disciplinary overviews they would be able to summarize and evaluate current concepts and methodologies that have been developed in the discipline, to provide an overview of findings and trends and to include critical evaluations and suggestions for the discipline’s future.

The initiative resulted in a remarkably large number of IPSA panel sessions and papers, as well as 12 book volumes published by Barbara Budrich Publishers between 2006 and 2012. The twelfth and concluding volume, edited by Trent and Stein, presents the accumulated findings and results they have culled from the previous volumes. Their conclusion is rather critical of the state of international political science:

“We view the contemporary discipline as insufficiently relevant to the political concerns of the average citizen; too ‘scientific’ in its emphasis on generating quantifiable and empirically testable propositions; and too dominated by what has aptly been described as the ‘American *cum* Transatlantic European perspective’ or disciplinary approach and methodology, one that draws heavily on the natural sciences. We call for a more balanced approach to an understanding of the historical development and current state of the discipline that relies and draws on the competing paradigms, approaches and methodologies of both mainstream positivist-empiricist and critical political science, ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonial ideas, normative and empirical analytical value perspectives, and regional-geographic and global political science communities.” (Trent & Stein 2012, 9)

I regard the work set in motion by Stein and Trent and this conclusion as an invitation to discuss the current performance and future strength of political science. It is important that, whatever one thinks of the opinions of Stein and Trent, the results they discuss are not based on personal speculations, but stem from ‘the research and opinions of more than 100 political scientists located around the world and backed up by other leading international scholars’ (Trent & Stein 2012, 155). It seems that many scientists and associations, including the IPSA as the broadest international organization of political scientists, can profit from this well-documented undertaking.

This article uses the findings of the Stein and Trent endeavour as well as other information (for instance on the Bologna Process and its implications for a discipline like political science in Europe and obstruction in the US Congress with regard to funding political science research) to discuss three topical issues:

- 1) the *actual strength* of political science as a discipline
- 2) the *relevance* of political science to society and politics, and
- 3) the *impact of current politics* on the discipline of political science.

I use the Trent and Stein volume extensively and simplify without much hesitation, as more detailed information can be found in their volume and the other volumes of the book series.

### **1. The Actual Strength of Political Science as a Discipline**

This section discusses three topics related to the actual strength of political science as a discipline. These are: 1) the relationship between the United States, Europe and the other continents, 2) the advances and challenges of the discipline, and 3) the issue of fragmentation and specialization. Each topic is followed by a proposition.

#### ***The United States, Europe and the Rest of the World: Competing Political Science Communities?***

There has been a steady expansion of political science around the world, with the discipline developing in an incremental manner. It can be argued that the modern discipline we are discussing was founded in the United States (US) in the late nineteenth century. This implies, according to Stein (2012, 67), that the discipline was defined in the underlying values of that country, such as liberal democracy and the pursuit of free academic inquiry, with, after the Second World War, its focus shifting to the objective of scientific truth as defined by modern philosophers of the natural sciences, based on the generation of hypotheses and empirical testing. Stein discloses a debate about the evolution of political science with roughly two positions, based on trends in political science handbooks.

The first position portrays the evolution as ‘essentially following a progressive path or upward trend to a more fully formed, more scientifically advanced and more generally accepted and legitimate academic enterprise’ (Stein 2012, 69). This can be recognized in *A New Handbook of Political Science*, edited by Robert Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1996). This is

not the place to discuss whether or not their historical analysis is sufficient (Stein mentions the literature dealing with that issue), but rather the claim of Goodin and Klingemann that the discipline is progressively moving in this American direction.

Philippe Schmitter takes the other position, by mentioning the scholarly exchanges between the US and Europe. Although he also sees an increasing consensus and convergence in concepts, methods and assumptions between the two political science communities, he argues that this synthesis is an unbalanced one that privileges the standards of political inquiry of American disciplinary practitioners. Schmitter, who uses the already quoted term 'American *cum* Transatlantic European perspective', also refers to a different 'European' political science, which is more intellectually, rather than professionally, oriented, more policy-relevant and more contextual in terms of time and space than the American one. Hence, for Schmitter the evolution of the discipline is not as direct as claimed by the first position, but rather a matter of a crisis of identity, which is due in part to the accelerating forces of globalization (Stein 2012, 70-71).

The idea of two large political science communities having a debate based on specific elements raises the question of what is happening in the rest of the world, where political science is also practised. Stein argues that Goodin and Klingemann fail to give sufficient attention to the non-western outlooks and values of important minority communities of professional political scientists. 'These include a rapidly growing body of Asian political scientists reflecting the interests and orientations of developing global powers such as China and India, a geographically and culturally diverse community of political scientists embracing the religio-cultural values of Islamic countries, or a vocal group of African political scientists focusing on the economic impoverishment and political instability of their sub-continent' (Stein 2012, 83). Stein also criticizes Schmitter for his inclination to define the regional cultural and geographical autonomy of European or Latin American political science communities 'largely in reactive and negative terms, in response to perceived American cultural imperialism'. Stein prefers to see the outlooks of these communities as independent and expects that much is to be gained from a cooperative and positive perspective on new ideas and approaches that are generated by 'the large, highly pluralistic, very innovative and energetic, if somewhat ethnocentric American political science community' (Stein 2012, 84). The chapter in the Trent and Stein volume on Asia, with its focus on Japan, South Korea and China, written by Takashi Inoguchi, is telling in this respect, because it shows the conceptual influence of American political science in these three countries. However, American political science 'does not care much about what's going on elsewhere' (Inoguchi 2012, 33).

Nonetheless, the idea of continents or major regions (Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Arab world) as identifiable political science

communities with regard to the development of the discipline seems promising, because it recognizes the culturally and geographically relevant aspects of these regions and their interaction with dominant American political science.<sup>1</sup> It will also allow the communities to define themselves more precisely vis-à-vis the discipline, which may be a matter to be taken up by the associations at various levels (national, regional, global). This view should not keep the profession from an integrative approach that brings together scientists from all over the world, nor should common features at the regional level reinforce existing stereotypes or weaken the visibility of the common worldwide goal of searching for better ways of promoting political science research and teaching.

### Proposition 1

*When discussing the evolution of political science as a discipline, it makes sense to discern the discipline's directions in a number of major regions (continents) with political science communities as locations where American political science has been influential, but where the discipline has also developed its own regional characteristics.*

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Discipline of Political Science*

How is the discipline of political science characterized in the Trent and Stein volume with regard to its strengths and weaknesses? I use the chapter by Trent on issues and trends in the discipline at the beginning of the twenty-first century and start with his summary of the advances.

The *advances* in political science since the 1980s are grouped under five headings: 1) steady expansion of the discipline, 2) the birth of a collective enterprise, 3) eclecticism of research, 4) a leap ahead in methodology, and 5) the creation of large data sets (Trent 2012b, 134-137).

- 1) *Steady expansion of the discipline* More than 40,000 political scientists around the world produce around a thousand political science journals, with a major expansion taking place in the former communist countries and the developing world. The IPSA has more than 50 national members (against 193 member states of the United Nations), most of which can claim a critical mass of political scientists who are adequately institutionalized and have reached

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<sup>1</sup> This article confirms the necessity of looking beyond national developments. The Stein and Trent project includes papers about national developments, but only a few dealing with developments per continent or major region.

‘adulthood’ with the steady expansion of departments, associations, journals, professors and students.

- 2) *The birth of a collective enterprise* Political science is a profession, with well-defined standards for training and employment, based institutionally in national university systems. The core components of the political science curriculum and a global set of research sub-fields apply across the world. Political scientists speak a common language.
- 3) *Eclecticism of research* Research output is characterized as diverse and eclectic, covering all levels of politics. But most work is still Western, though with growing amounts from Central and Eastern Europe and the developing world.
- 4) *A leap ahead in methodology* This refers to great advances in research techniques and information sources, with a tremendous interest in working out research design issues.
- 5) *The creation of large data sets* This refers to a number of large international data sets that contain dozens of key variables, indexes and classifications that allow easier comparison of countries on both a static and a dynamic basis.

A few comments are already obvious in this summary of the state of the discipline. Some simple questions can be raised immediately, for instance with regard to the number of political scientists. Michael Brintnall et al. (2008, 11) refer to some 10,000 academic political scientists in the United States (29 per cent of them women), Hans-Dieter Klingemann (2007, 31) mentions around 10,000 in Western Europe, which would leave about 20,000 in the rest of the world. Do we know more details? ‘Well-defined standards’ in the discipline may be another issue to detail, given the differences between, for instance, European countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany on the one hand and France and Italy on the other, and the stronger impact of American political science in Northern Western Europe than in Southern or Eastern Europe (see Klingemann 2007; Eisfeld & Pal 2010; Berndtson 2012).

The *issues and challenges* mentioned by Trent (2012b, 137) are the viability of research paradigms, tensions between objective and normative approaches, keeping up with global change, Western and male predominance, making political theory reflect society, the fragmentation of the discipline, tendencies toward excessive specialization, and relevance to politics, the media and the public. I will not illustrate all of these (specialization and relevance are discussed separately), but mention a few elements from the global perspective.

The outcome of the Stein and Trent project shows that almost all political science research paradigms are severely questioned and that there have been no major breakthroughs. The sub-field of international relations is still mainly a Western project, but even in the ‘Western’ region there is a growing perception that the prevailing Westphalian idea of statehood does not grasp current

processes of transformation. Keeping up with global change is a real challenge, with rapid global shifts another reason for a reduced understanding of current politics. The profound global changes make it increasingly difficult for political theory to reflect the world. Political science is still predominantly Western and male, with barely a third of political scientists being female (although with slightly better figures for the new cohort). Furthermore, the non-white groups are poorly represented (Trent 2012b, 138-139). Trent mentions the skewed representation of the IPSA membership as one of the ongoing problems in the field of gender and politics. 'There are very few members from Africa, Japan, Korea, China, Central Asia, Vietnam and other parts of Asia, the Caribbean and the Arab Middle East', which in part reflects the culture and the status of women of these countries and their political institutions, but also the hegemony of the English language within the IPSA (Trent 2012b, 133).

It may be asked: how well are political scientists aware of the advances and challenges of their discipline both in general and in their continent or major region? Whether an organization like the IPSA can profit from discussing advantages and challenges of the discipline on several continents (both in its general development and in its specifics) could be debated. But such a deliberation may contribute to better representation from these continents as well as to developing a strategy to enlarge continental representation.

### **Proposition 2**

*Discussing the advantages and challenges of the discipline of political science in a continent or major region may contribute to a better understanding of the overall evolution of the discipline (both in its general development and in its specifics) and to better representation of the regions in an international association like the IPSA, amongst others through a new regional strategy. In this discussion special attention should be paid to gender and race relations.*

### ***The Issue of Fragmentation and Excessive Specialization***

One of the issues mentioned by Trent (2012b, 130) is the increasing fragmentation of the discipline, including the bifurcation of the discipline into international relations and the 'rest', in particular because it is rather difficult nowadays to discern between the domestic and the international spheres. A similar argument can be made for public administration and its propensity to have separate departments and associations. Fragmentation like this leads to the blurring of the discipline's boundaries and its representation. Furthermore, there is an excessive specialization within political science, with most researchers

drawn into ever-narrower fields of research, often with their international colleagues, while ignoring local issues and local colleagues. Although there is an obvious reason for specialization (scientific progress) and although there are plusses (such as links to non-academic interests), the major fear is the creation of divisions that ‘impede effective communication, prevent cumulation, hamper debates within the discipline, and reduce our capacity to deal with political reality’ (Trent 2012b, 140).

Arguments that have been heard are that the discipline may move in the direction of saying more and more about less and less and that the political science community has rejected ‘great debates’, settling for Kuhnian ‘normal’ science, with each researcher self-encapsulated within one of a broad range of coexisting theoretical perspectives, called analytical eclecticism. The basic impression that came out of the Stein and Trent project is ‘still one of a discipline in search of its soul and out of touch with the real world of politics’ (Trent 2012a, 156).

The questions to be raised are: why is specialization so dominant in the discipline of political science and what can be done? Trent mentions various drivers of specialization (apart from scientific progress also compartmentalization in education and careerism) and discerns between two types of specialization. One – to be discouraged – is inward-looking within a narrow sector of the discipline, where increased resources eventually only engender reduced returns. The other (hybrid specialization) turns toward the outside to learn from and be illuminated by advances in similar sectors in neighbouring disciplines. This form of specialization is responsible for the flowering of knowledge and should be encouraged, by the discipline’s associations as well (Trent 2012a, 160-161). ‘It is about time our “professional” associations started acting professionally instead of just running academic activities and publications’ (Trent 2012a, 161). Although some initiatives have been taken (e.g. the IPSA taking care that its World Congresses start with Main Theme Sessions that bridge the discipline), the impression remains that these are sticking plasters, while many political scientists remain unaware of why these activities are or should be organized.

### **Proposition 3**

*Professional associations (national and international) need to strengthen their efforts to discuss the issue of fragmentation and excessive specialization in the discipline of political science, to discourage inward-looking specialization and to promote hybrid specialization.*

## 2. The Relevance of Political Science to Society and Politics

To what extent is the discipline of political science relevant? The Stein and Trent project found a wide recognition that in general the discipline has little relevance for politics, the media and the public. The discipline has few public intellectuals and few connections with the political class. Because of the extensive specialization and scientific ‘pretensions’ of the discipline there is a retreat from domestic political debate, a poor application of political science research to politics and weak visibility in the media in comparison with other disciplines. The general result, according to Trent (2012b, 140), is ‘a widening gap between public expectations and scholarly interest and a sense that we are not helping citizens’.

Trent also raises the question of research methods that lead to results that are too narrow, irrelevant and tentative. He refers to the book *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* (2004), edited by Ian Shapiro, Rogers Smith and Tarek Masoud, which portrays political science as a battlefield of highly disparate agendas, worshipping conflicting ideals of scientific endeavour, with the main conflict being problem-driven research versus methods and theory-driven studies. ‘Real world relevance and eclectic methods confront analytical rigour, explanatory elegance, and the goal of a unified science’ (Trent 2012a, 166). The alternative of a unified science is a science that seeks ‘to help achieve good ends’, which in the book edited by Shapiro et al. is defended by people like Robert Dahl. In the volume in ‘The World of Political Science’ Series edited by Harald Baldersheim and Hellmut Wollmann, *The Comparative Study of Local Government & Politics* (2006), the proposed alternative approach combines problems with theory orientation, in a sort of return to Harold Lasswell’s programme for ‘policy sciences’ that are both scientifically sound and practically relevant (Lasswell 1951).

These conclusions about the relevance of political science to society and politics are alarming and Trent (2012a, 169) believes in the need for a global commission to launch an academic debate on the evaluation and the development of political science, including the need for ‘purposeful political studies’.

### Proposition 4

*The discipline of political science should seriously discuss its limited pertinence to politics, the media and the public, from the perspective of both relevance to society and the discipline’s research methods. One way to do this is the establishment of a global commission, set up by the IPSA and other associations, but with representatives from all continents or major regions as discussed before and with special attention to gender and race.*

### 3. The Impact of Current Politics on the Discipline of Political Science

Given some political developments that are taking place in the US and Europe, quite visibly or in a more concealed way, political scientists and their associations should be forewarned.

One of these developments is in the US, where the Senate on 5 November 2009 voted on an amendment tabled by Senator Thomas Coburn to change the Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations Act. Coburn argued that scarce funds should be spent on endeavours ‘yielding breakthroughs and discoveries that can improve the human condition’. A third of the Senators supported him in an amendment that would have prohibited the National Science Foundation (NSF) ‘from wasting federal research funding on political science projects’ (*apud* Trent 2012a, 157). In 2010 the American Political Science Association (APSA), which is an actor far more powerful than its institutional counterparts in Europe or elsewhere, began mobilizing its association members and individuals within the discipline against this amendment. Eventually the Senate defeated the amendment, but the APSA has continued to monitor the status of political science at the NSF. On 9 May 2012 the House of Representatives passed an amendment that would prohibit funding of the NSF’s political science programme. The vote was 218-208, largely along party lines. Once again the APSA alerted its members, in order to prevent a similar outcome in the summer of 2012. And in March 2013 Senator Coburn introduced another amendment, to dramatically restrict funding of political science research to research that promotes ‘national security or the economic interests of the United States’ only (see for an overview of this legislative history <http://community.apsanet.org/Advocacy/SectionDirectory>). The amendment was adopted by voice vote in the Senate and effective to the end of September 2013. The APSA hired a lobbying firm to prevent the continuation of the Coburn terminology in future legislation and to promote alternative terms that return the scope of NSF funding for the political science programme to its pre-Coburn stage. On 18 July the Senate Appropriations Committee passed the 2014 Commerce, Justice and Science Bill without restrictions on political science, but in November it was not yet clear when the bill would reach the Senate floor (<http://community.apsanet.org/Advocacy/Issues/Coburn>). However, in January 2014 Congress completed action on the 2014 bill covering the entire federal government expenditure. The good news was that the new bill did not include the Coburn amendment.

Financial threats to political science research also exist in Europe, where in 2010 the European Commission downsized the funding for the socio-economic and humanities research projects while preparing a New Framework Programme for Research and Development, which is impacting the social sciences and humanities (in jargon: SSH) as a group. This development requires a short explanation (see Reinalda 2008, Symposium 2013). The European

Commission's engagement in research policies and funding has its background in the Bologna Process of 1999, which set in motion a large-scale operation of reform and harmonization of European universities and academic institutions. Although education was regarded as a matter of national concern in European integration, the Bologna Process enabled the European Commission to play a role in higher education with its own preferences, among them a predilection for applied research and interdisciplinarity. The Commission used the European Union's 2000 Lisbon strategy for economic growth and employment to extend its involvement in the higher education sector by including research aspects. In its 2003 Action Plan 'Investing in Research', it recognized higher education institutions among the key stakeholders in European research, followed by a strategy of synergies between higher education and research in the Bologna Process or, in Bologna terms, between the European Higher Education Area and the EU's European Research Area. The growing significance of research elements in the Lisbon strategy provided the European Commission in the early 2000s with a crucial opening to advocate substantial reform of institutional and research management in Europe's universities. The Commission forged a line of argument which necessitates its own preference for 'applied' research, by maintaining that 'research products' such as innovations, new technologies, knowledge assets and intellectual property should be directed towards the benefit of society (cf. Keeling 2006, 209). In 2009 the Commission decided on a new concept in SSH research, focusing increasingly on a challenge-driven approach. It argued that, in a world being put to the test on a daily basis by global societal challenges, the social sciences and humanities have unique opportunities to increase their contribution to and impact on society. The new approach is based on the identification of a number of important challenges facing Europe in a short- to medium-term perspective. These challenges have to be addressed by pooling resources, achieving critical mass and developing coherent and complementary research activities. Soon it became clear that broader long-term integrated projects in the social sciences and humanities were to be abolished in favour of a focus on 'grand challenges', with topics that are applied rather than basic research and that are supposed to foster European competitiveness in global markets. This planning included the downsizing of funding for social sciences and humanities research in 2010.

Thomas Risse, Carina Sprungk and Tanja Börzel organized a protest against the European Commission's thematic and financial downsizing in December 2010, including a text in which they argued why it is important to strengthen social science research more than the European Commission had proposed.<sup>2</sup> Because of the decentralized structure of the social sciences concerted action

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<sup>2</sup> See the full text, for instance at [http://www.snesup.fr%2Findex.php%3Fmodule%3Dwebuploads%26func%3Ddownload%26fileId%3D3356\\_0&ei=Grl4U8zqJuaP7AaG5YDoBQ&usg=AFQjCNHOXDJpM94k7a7i9ZHW98WKHu-TgA&bvm=bv.66917471,d.ZGU](http://www.snesup.fr%2Findex.php%3Fmodule%3Dwebuploads%26func%3Ddownload%26fileId%3D3356_0&ei=Grl4U8zqJuaP7AaG5YDoBQ&usg=AFQjCNHOXDJpM94k7a7i9ZHW98WKHu-TgA&bvm=bv.66917471,d.ZGU)

was difficult to arrange, but they suggested that political scientists and others should disseminate their arguments to national and European Union policy makers by using their connections and networks. It may be questioned whether many political scientists have become aware of these developments.

Another danger to political science to be mentioned here is the strong demand by the Bologna Process and the European Commission to move towards interdisciplinary teaching and research, combined with the belief among European policy makers that universities will become more efficient if small departments are integrated in larger schools within university structures. In the Stein and Trent project Erkki Berndtson argues that European political science as a discipline is especially vulnerable. Within the social sciences political science is more heterogeneous than economics and sociology and has experienced much more debate on whether the discipline is in fact a science or not. It is also weak in comparison to economics and sociology in the sense that in Europe it has developed relatively late and it is not an established field in all countries (Berndtson 2012, 60). Like other disciplines, political science had to deal with the new Bologna Process format, characterized by the Bachelor and Master structure and the assumption that students will simply move between departments in the Bologna member countries. These countries had to modify the duration of their curriculum into more compact programmes in two cycles and to reconsider the core subject areas as well as the literature used. In most countries the length of the curriculum was reduced to fewer years. Various subject areas had to disappear or become optional and more literature in English was introduced (more in Symposium 2013). All this and the European Commission's pressure for interdisciplinarity (both in the Bologna Process and in its vision of research) raises the issue of the coherence the discipline had established since the 1970s.

### **Proposition 5**

*Given the political developments taking place in both the United States and Europe, resulting in both the downsizing of the research budgets for political science and instructions for the direction of research (either promoting the national security or economic interests of the US or fostering European competitiveness in global markets), the discipline should discuss these developments, assess them and develop a strategy to counter the negative threats to the discipline, also taking into account what is happening on the other continents.*

## Conclusion

The volume *The World of Political Science*, edited by Trent and Stein, proves a helpful tool to discover the stronger and weaker sides of the discipline of political science. The five propositions – three on the strength, or rather weaknesses, of the discipline, one on its restricted relevance and one on political developments that have an impact on it – are topical issues that should worry many individual political scientists and their associations.

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