

FOCUS ON:

# Outside Academia: Political Science as a Profession

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It is not uncommon to hear descriptions of the academic profession as an activity that takes place in an ivory tower. Academics, so the argument runs, are too focused on scientific work, and not sufficiently willing to share and engage with wider audiences. This could be the case for Political Science, which in Italy seems to be confined to academia. **But this is not exactly true.**

This IPS issue takes this criticism head on by going outside the ‘ivory tower’ to explore Political Scientists’ roles as managers, experts, consultants or public officials. **We have reached out to a number of scholars and practitioners who actively participate in the political and social world we study, either because they have public roles in it, or private careers.** Specifically, we asked IPS contributors to comment on two broad themes that pertain to the relationship between Political Science and the ‘world out there’.

The first theme is the distinctive contributions that political scientists can make in public debate and political processes but also the reverse, i.e. the additional value of experiences as public official or consultant to academic work. What emerges from the interviews and contributions in this issue is a generally positive assessment of the public role of political scientists. On the one hand, our contributors largely agree that the mindset (and education) of political scientists provide us with the ability to foster a more informed public debate and more efficient policy solutions. “Academic engagement can shape the terms of public discourse, providing information, and analytical models” (**Cacciotto**). According to the IPS contributors, this ability stems from our holistic and complex understanding of how the political sphere works, our knowledge of its rules and processes, and our capacity to be flexible and adaptable. On the other hand, “political experience provides political scientists with enormous knowledge about the objects they study” (**Gualmini**). In general, “academics and practitioners complement and improve each other in their respective endeavours and, together, they do a better job” (**Settembri**).

The second major theme our contributors were invited to comment on is the question of the ‘relevance’ of our discipline when compared to others such as law and economics. In this respect, there is substantial variation in the contributions that follow. In general, virtually all the authors seem to agree that political scientists should reach out more regularly. At the same time, however, there is no consensus on whether such public outreach is the

key to increased relevance, in terms of obtaining a hearing in public and political debates. **What emerges from the contributions is a widespread belief that political scientists are somehow marginalized in public debates and political decisions in our country**, especially when compared to lawyers and economists: “we find ourselves operating in a cultural tradition that attributes to lawyers pride of place in the management of ‘cosa pubblica’.” (**Ventura**); “economists have an advantage compared to political scientists: they simplify reality and give clear messages to policy-makers and stakeholders. Political scientists tend, by contrast, to make things complex and to give articulated and complex answers (**Natali**). This also applies in the EU institutions, though to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, “for political scientists it is maybe easier than for academics with other backgrounds (for example anthropology, linguistics or psychology) to pursue policy advice as well” (**Liberatore**). Furthermore, **it seems as if political scientists are reluctant to be vociferous in areas that clearly fall within the scope of their expertise, such as the area of public policy**. Given this state of affairs, “getting our hands dirty” does not automatically translate into increased relevance.

In addition to these broad themes, IPS contributors also discuss the risks that derive from going outside the ivory tower. One author finds that “by becoming a decision-maker (e.g., by engaging directly in politics or public administration), the scholar tends to lose social recognition as a source of independent knowledge, and therefore s/he loses an important power resource” (**Martinelli**). Even for those who are much more positively oriented towards the direct intervention of scholars in decision-making processes, there are dangers: “You are doing things that you, as a scholar, do not approve of, even if you understand the meaning and sometimes the utility in the political game (...) an anchorage to a value system must be present” (**Sacchi**). Of course, these risks are not confined to political scientists, but apply to all disciplines that move beyond their scientific circles. At any rate, in reflecting on the implications of public engagement for political scientists, the IPS contributors remind us all of the conflicting logics of academic research and policy-making. Whereas the former is much more long-term in orientation, and largely free of constraints, the latter is more short-term, and decisional constraints are part of a larger machine (whether this be domestic (parliamentary) decision-making or the bureaucratic politics of an EU institution). Furthermore, the sources of authority are significantly different, **as authority in academia is largely the result of scientific reputation, whereas in the ‘real world’ it largely depends on problem-solving ability**. Reconciling the two logics is possible but also extremely complicated: “it is a fragile balance between different priorities and ways of looking at politics” (**Natali**).

Finally, it is interesting to note that several of our contributors make suggestions for the (re)organization of our undergraduate and graduate degree courses. In particular, there is general agreement on the need for more practical knowledge, for more “testimonies” from policy-makers but also for broader knowledge (**Martinelli**). “In today’s world, any political science curriculum should include activities, based on active pedagogy, that stimulate the problem-solving skills of students such as simulations, group projects, international exchanges and workshops with practitioners (**Marchi**). These suggestions tie in with the major issues discussed above; namely, the idea that political scientists’ distinctive contribution to public life consists precisely in a mindset that is able to grasp complexity in the political and social world. Suggestions that we should tilt towards more

generalized knowledge and transversal skills, however, clash with the principle of specialization which has inspired much of the evolution of our discipline over the past two/three decades. **Whether to pursue one path or another, or how to combine them, provides further food for thought.** These issues – as highlighted by IPS contributors – represent a concern for all of us.