

# AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL SCIENCE AT SAINT MICHAEL'S COLLEGE

## I. THE DISCIPLINE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Political Science is the study of how humans live collectively—how individuals organize themselves into social structures and how they make decisions concerning their common destiny. As students of politics, we seek to understand the structures and processes of government on both the local and national levels, as well as the relations among states of the world stage. Our focus, however, is broader than the formal institutions of government. Many social entities outside of government, including political parties, interest groups, corporations, the media or even other nations, also influence the allocation of values and goods within a society. Hence, civil and economic organizations are also within the purview of political science. Finally, because politics is an inherently moral enterprise, one involving the pursuit of justice, we are concerned not with how societies are governed, but also how they ought to be governed.

The Political Science Department does not view itself as a vocational program, and we do not train politicians. However, we believe the study of politics is valuable for several reasons. Foremost of these is that political science offers the student excellent preparation for the role of a lifetime, that of an informed and self-critical citizen. Only a hermit can avoid the burdens of citizenship. The ancient Greek societies, from whom much of our political thought has descended, used the word “idiot” to describe a person who took no interest in public affairs. Then as now, the term was a pejorative one, for such persons were viewed as having shirked their responsibilities to their neighbors. Since none of us can really avoid politics by retreating wholly into our private lives, our choice is limited to either the active participation in the political process or the passive acceptance of political decisions made by others. Educated people bear a special responsibility to bring to their community an enhanced understanding of the nature of society and its governance.

The Liberal Studies component of the St. Michael's College curriculum is predicated on four principles, among which is the empowerment of women and men to “participate constructively in society and its institutions” and as informed citizens more effectively “meet the challenges of an increasingly integrated global community” (St. Michael's College Catalogue, p. 54). The Political Science Department shares this goal, and seeks through its program to develop in its students the understanding and the reflective habits of mind that will enable them to become leaders in their civic and political communities and participants in an ever more globally integrated and diverse society.

However, the Political Science Department does not ignore the vocational needs of its students. The last section of this handout will address some specific career options that political science majors tend to follow. Here, we refer the student to the third principle of the St. Michael's College Liberal Studies curriculum, that the academic

program should “promote the ability to think critically and to communicate thoughts in a clear and persuasive fashion” (Ibid.). The discipline of political science exposes students to critical normative evaluations of social processes, as well as to the analysis of quantified empirical data. Insightful reading, critical thinking, and effective oral and written communication are important skills developed through the study of political science. These analytic and communicative skills are difficult to acquire, but are universally applicable in the careers students seek after college. They will be useful for getting one’s first job, and essential for one’s first promotion.

Finally, the second principle of the Liberal Studies curriculum proposes that students should “develop an understanding and appreciation of the intrinsic value of the liberal arts and sciences” (Ibid.). The Political Science Department hopes that students who choose to major in political science will find the subject interesting and personally fulfilling. In fact, this is the best reason for becoming a political science major. When we study politics, we learn more about ourselves and the world we have built. The political science program should stimulate the student’s growth, both intellectually and morally, and should provide them with the opportunity to realize their fullest human potential, to lead useful and gratifying lives. Increasingly, this opportunity includes ever more exposure to diverse cultures and peoples through study abroad experiences as well as greater attention to international events as they impact local, national and international experiences.

It should be apparent from all this that the Political Science Department does not view the Liberal Studies curriculum that typically dominates the student’s early years in college as a stepping-stone into the political science major. Rather, the political science program is intended to augment the Liberal Studies program, and to further the goals of that required sequence of courses. Consequently, the student is encouraged to invest as much time and effort in their Liberal Studies courses as in their political science courses. The Liberal Studies sequence provides an intellectual context within which one’s major acquires meaning. The Department has long been a significant contributor to the Liberal Studies curriculum, and remains firmly committed to its aspiration of developing the well-rounded individual who shares an appreciation for the intellectual life.

## **II. THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

### **A. Teaching Staff**

Members of the Political Science Department hold doctorates from some of the finest institutions of higher learning in the United States. All are deeply committed to scholarship and to undergraduate teaching. Much more information germane to the faculty in political science, as well as the major, the minor, student activities and clubs, internships study abroad and many other ways to become involved with Political Science at Saint Michael’s can be located at the Department website at: <http://www.smcvt.edu/academics/politicalscience/>

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## B. The Political Science Major

The major in political science has been developed by the department to acquaint the student with the essential subject matter and methodologies of the discipline, while permitting students ample discretion to pursue their own unique intellectual interests. The following curriculum is required of students majoring in political science, and is intended to build upon the Liberal Studies courses sequence required by the College for all students. The political science major consists of seven required political science courses, plus a minimum of four elective courses in political science. This will give the student between 32 and 36 required credits in political science. Additional political science courses may be taken, but students should not exceed 52 credits in political science. Notice that a small number of courses outside the Political Science Department are also required.

1. Political Science:

PO101 Introduction to Politics	3 credits
PO120 Introduction to American National Politics (Sections A/B recommended for majors)	3 or 4 credits
PO200 Research Methods	3 credits
PO245 International Relations	3 or 4 credits
PO261 Western Political Thought	3 credits
PO285 Introduction to Comparative Politics	3 credits
PO410 Senior Seminar in Politics	4 credits

Any FOUR elective courses in the Political  
Science Department 3 or 4 credits

Optional political science courses,  
Preferably not to exceed 52 total credits

2. Two writing intensive courses, including First Year Seminar, plus the Political Science Senior Seminar. Students found deficient in writing skills may be required to take EN 101 Writing I. Additional writing courses, and frequent consultation with the SMC Writing Clinic are recommended.
3. To insure cross disciplinary exposure to social phenomena, NINE CREDITS from among the fields of Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Psychology or Sociology must be taken (two of these courses already may have been taken as part of the Liberal Studies requirements). At least one course in Economics is recommended.

C. The Political Science Minor

The Department also offers a minor in political science. To receive credit for a minor in political science, a student must fill out the appropriate form in the Registrar's Office, and complete at least six courses, for a minimum of eighteen credit hours in political science. Among these, the student must complete the following:

PO120 Introduction to American National Politics	3 or 4 credits
PO261 Western Political Thought	3 credits

And any ONE of the following:

PO245 International Relations	3 or 4 credits
PO285 Introduction to Comparative Politics	3 credits

In addition, choose:

Any three elective courses in the Political Science Department

Students who are interested in taking political science courses, but who do not wish to major or minor in political science, are encouraged to do so. It is the policy of the Department to place prerequisites or other restrictions on only a few courses.

#### D. Alternative Education

The Department has no mandatory alternative education programs as a part of the major, but service learning or participant research is required in some courses. Students are also encouraged to explore the possibility of engaging in undergraduate research, working with a faculty member with research support from different sources on campus. On an individual basis, the Department considers and supports the use of internships, Study Abroad, and other experiential endeavors which will enhance the goals of liberal education at St. Michael's College. A variety of internships in state and local government and non-profit organizations are regularly available for highly qualified students. St. Michael's College is an affiliate in the Washington Semester program of American University, and several students participated annually in their program combining classroom study and internships in the federal government. Further information on internships or other alternative educational opportunities can be obtained from academic advisors, the Director of Study Abroad, and the Student Resource Center.

#### E. Standards and Practices

While the conduct of courses is at the discretion of individual professors, there are certain minimum standards and practices throughout the department.

1. All out-of-class written work is expected to follow high standards of English and scholarly style. Footnotes and other required documentation should be used whenever appropriate. The Department standard for all work is Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), or Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* (Boston, Bedford Books, 1992). *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White (New York: MacMillan, 1959) is also helpful. It is strongly advised that all students purchase or at least have access to these books for reference, along with a good dictionary and thesaurus. Also, students are encouraged to prepare early drafts of written assignments, and consult with the SMC Writing Clinic, for editorial assistance. Professors may impose grade penalties for deficiencies in either English or scholarly style.
2. Plagiarism and cheating are grave ethical offenses and will not be tolerated by the Department. Department policy on these matters is consistent with the Academic Integrity Policy, adopted by St. Michael's College in May of 1989. A copy of the

policy is available from the Dean of the College, and is included in the SMC Student Handbook.

3. Class attendance is the individual responsibility of the student. Classes will be held on all scheduled class days, and professors may require attendance and impose penalties for absence.
4. All academic work is required on all due dates, and professors may impose grade penalties for lateness.

#### F. Academic Advising

The department is deeply committed to academic advising. Each student will be assigned an academic advisor in the Department. Your advisor is available to help you in making decisions governing your academic life at St. Michael's College, and to aid in making career or educational choices for life after graduation. Your advisor is available to provide help, but the decisions must ultimately be the student's own. All members of the department hold regular office hours or are available by special appointment.

#### G. Political Science Club

The Political Science Club is a student run organization open to all SMC students. It serves to stimulate interest in political science beyond the classroom through the use of debates, films, lectures, and informal discussions, as well as several annual off-campus activities.

### **III. CAREERS AND THE STUDY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

Predicting the future career market is a risky enterprise, as it is contingent on the state of the economy, which in turn is influenced by a complex variety of factors that are only imperfectly understood. One thing that can be said with confidence, however, is that an individual who is college educated will be at a substantial advantage over one who is not. We live in an era of rapid economic transformation, in which the United States is rapidly becoming a "knowledge economy." Persons with intellectual skills—especially communicative, analytical, quantitative and statistical, and computer-based—will possess the flexibility to respond advantageously to changing circumstances. With many occupations becoming obsolete, more than technical skills will be required for successful careers. Skills in "judgment," the weighing and evaluation of alternative problem solving strategies in a variety of institutional contexts, will also contribute to one's success. The best projections available indicate that professional and technical jobs will grow at a rate slightly faster than other fields. Positions in business and finance will increase only modestly, while jobs in the public sector will probably be few and highly competitive.

We present here admittedly an incomplete overview of the career opportunities available to college graduates with majors in political science. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but represents the kinds of careers favored by political science graduates. Today, former SMC political science majors are found in all of these fields. Most of this information is taken from, Mary H. Curzan, *Careers and the Study of Political Science: a Guide for Undergraduates*, published by the American Political Science Association. A copy of this book is available from the Department Chair, or from the Career Placement Office, in the Student Resource Center.

#### A. Business and Finance

Many graduates with degrees in political science enter the world of business, banking and finance. Specific fields include marketing, personnel, advertising, and public relations. Many large firms have their own management trainee programs that are attractive to political science majors, while others go on the MBA programs at a variety of universities. Many students are hired directly into entry-level positions in a variety of firms. Political science does not, of course, directly equip the student with the technical skills needed for the business world, so the Department recommends that its students acquire some entry level skills by taking elective courses in the Business Department, or possibly exploring the Business minor. Courses in economics, calculus, accounting, statistics and computer science might prove particularly helpful as supplements to the major in political science. What the Department can directly offer the student is excellent preparation in crucial evaluation, communicative skills and basic quantitative and statistical analysis. Knowledge of “the World” in its broadest manifestation can only be helpful in business as well.

#### B. Law

The United States has about a third of the world’s lawyers, and a surprisingly large number of them are former political science majors. There is, however, no particular “pre-law” curriculum favored by law schools. Law draws on a variety of fields of knowledge, and most law schools try to cultivate a diversity of backgrounds among their students. Admission is based primarily on undergraduate preparation and LSAT scores. Thus, political science is not a necessary conduit to law school. However, there is a logical affinity between the study of politics and law, so that political science is the most popular undergraduate major among law students. Again, communicative skills, especially writing skills, are essential, for a lawyer lives by words.

Breadth of knowledge, gained in courses that emphasize reading, analytical and writing skills, is a must for success in law. The modern practitioner is less likely to be in private practice than is commonly assumed. Many lawyers now work in government, or as part of the legal department of large corporations and organizations such as labor union, trade association and the like. Those in private practice tend to work in mid-sized firms with a number of other practitioners. Law is becoming highly specialized, although legal education continues to be generalist in orientation.

More specific information can be found in the *Pre-Law Handbook*, published by the Association of America Law Schools. Copies can be purchased, or are available from the Pre-Law Committee, or in the Student Resource Center.

### C. Government

With over 13 million employees, the federal government has become the nation's largest employer. Certainly, any firm of that size can be expected to hire a substantial number of new employees annually. However, the 1980s were a period of retrenchment in non-military federal activities, while the 1990s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been a period of more extreme budgetary constraints, both seriously limiting the job opportunities in the federal government. Undergraduate preparation depends on the nature of the position, and the vocational opportunities offered by the federal government are so varied that generalization becomes nearly impossible. Most positions in federal agencies are now governed by civil service regulations. Diplomatic staff are governed through the Foreign Service, which administers its own screening examination, and is highly competitive. Legislative staff work provides some opportunities for eager recent graduates. Military and security careers also remain prominent.

As with law, there is a logical affinity between the study of political science and careers in the public sector, even though the discipline is not geared to career preparation. Once again, the intellectual and communicative skills developed through a liberal arts education will serve one well in government work. Details on career opportunities can be obtained from a local Federal Job Information Center, a part of the Office of Personnel Management, found in most major cities.

### D. Journalism

Contemporary Americans are insatiable consumers of information, and the mass media, whether print or electronic, are a ubiquitous presence in our lives. Knowledge of the political world is indispensable to effective journalism, so that the Journalism Department requires its majors to take some political science. As with business, political science students considering a career in journalism should acquire some technical skills by taking a few elective journalism courses. Obviously, writing skills are the very substance of the profession and should be carefully cultivated. Critical thinking, the ability to place details in a social context, and effectively communicate their significance to a wider audience will also be essential. Although the job market in media is a tight one, some practical experience can be gained by working on the campus newspaper, radio station, or in video production.

### E. Non-Profit Sector

Many students who graduate with a major in political science gravitate towards fields that provide services for people, but are not formally government programs. Working with the homeless, social work, refugee resettlement, advocacy of all types, even

service abroad are areas of work that increasingly attract students of political science. There has also been an enormous growth over the past decade in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mobilizing on the behalf of the welfare of women and children, labor, the environment, persecuted minorities, those stricken with communicable disease and other causes. Students find that in addition to the communication and analytical skills developed through the political science major, study abroad as well as service work prepares one for work in this growing field that reflects the growing integration of societies, cultures and peoples.

#### F. Education

Teachers at the secondary level need to be flexible and to have a breadth of knowledge about the world. Vermont, in common with many other states, now requires an undergraduate major in a liberal arts field as part of its teacher certification requirements. However, the student who wishes to enter this field will also have to take a substantial number of courses in the Education Department, including a semester of student teaching, and so should plan their curriculum with care. Advising in both Departments throughout the student's four years will be essential.

College and university teaching is a very gratifying career for the highly motivated individual with excellent research and communicative skills. The market remains a tight one, however. In today's academic world, a Ph.D. from a well-regarded university is essential. Information on graduate education in political science can be found in *A Guide to Graduate Study in Political Science*, published by the American Political Science Association. A copy may be borrowed from the Department Chair, or can be inspected at the Student Resource Center.

As can be seen from these comments, the answer to the question, "What can I do with a bachelor's degree in political science?" is, "Anything one can do with a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts." Hence, the recommendation of the Political Science Department is to major in political science because you find it a personally fulfilling field of inquiry. You are most likely to do well academically, and to gain the most that a liberal arts education offers, by studying a subject that is intrinsically interesting. The Student Resource Center has career counselors, and conducts regular study skills and career planning seminars. Students are encouraged to take advantage of their expertise.