European Political Science
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00512-0

DEBATE

'Why would you want to study politics? Everyone knows what that is.' The case for the teaching of political science in the UK

Victoria C. Honeyman[1]

Accepted: 7 January 2025

Abstract

Many subjects within the arts, humanities and social sciences are judged harshly by some within society, particularly those who believe that they lack the heft and intrinsic usefulness of the hard sciences. Rishi Sunak, the former British Prime Minister, implied the primacy of maths within the subject hierarchy when he argued it should be privileged amongst subjects by being taught to all students in the UK in some format until they were 18. He also implied within this that some students were taking other subjects rather than maths and that this was detrimental to British business, although it was not stated so overtly (Sunak, 17th April 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-outlines-his-vision-for-maths-to-18). The necessity of social sciences, particularly Political Science within the UK context will be discussed in this paper. Political Science as a subject area has always been viewed with some suspicion by those who fear the education of individuals on the mechanisms of power within a nation and those who confuse education with indoctrination. This fear has, yet again, become a prevailing concern in many countries and this paper will explore that concern. It will conclude that the social sciences and humanities perform a vital role within society and academia and the elevation or denigration of subjects focusing on contentious issues should not be tolerated when driven by political expediency or the desire of some to close down debate.

Keywords Political science · Social sciences · Humanities · Teaching and learning

Politics is, at its heart, a contentious subject. Often driven by personal preference, morals and the belief (or lack of it) in different individuals or governments, political

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

✉ Victoria C. Honeyman
V.C.Honeyman@Leeds.ac.uk

[1] POLIS, University of Leeds, 13thFloor, Social Sciences Building, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

Published online: 17 January 2025

disagreement can often descend into vocal argument and conflict. That, however, is political opinion. Most people have them, but they aren't necessarily always best shared. Politics occupies an important position within society, impacting on the everyday lives of every individual, asking their opinion periodically and inviting comment, as well as being studied, researched and taught as an academic subject. This intersection of casual comment and academic rigour can lead some to mistakenly believe that political science and related disciplines are built merely on personal opinion and convictions. The study of politics and international relations is a very different creature and only rarely descends into vocal argument. The, sometimes deliberate, conflation of opinion and informed theory, analysis and argument have made political science (and by extension international relations and international development) targets for those who wish to shut down debate and discussion in favour of their own brand of political opinion. It could even be argued that encouraging a lack of information on political systems might be beneficial for those who seek to close down opposition and public debate. The 'culture wars' have, in the UK and some other nations, been positioned side-by-side with concerns over educational standards and numeracy within the wider population, implying that young people are opting for 'easier' options or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees (as discussed in *The Daily Telegraph* in May 2024 (Haynes 2024)). This is a heady cocktail as it argues, on the one hand, that politics is an invalid subject for discussion in universities as it indoctrinates young people, while on the other, arguing that it is an irrelevant subject and instead the focus, and certainly the available funding, should be on STEM subjects which are of value to society. This criticism, levelled at a number of subjects within the humanities and social sciences, implies (and sometimes outright states) that these subjects are worthless in comparison to 'proper' subjects (which usually implies STEM subjects although it is rarely defined beyond maths and science) and therefore not worthy of any form of governmental funding. That funding might be research funding, where humanities and social sciences often find themselves at a disadvantage, or it might be in terms of the funding of student tuition fees through the student loan systems (for example Preston 2015; Gopal, 2023).

It is inevitable that there are hierarchies within academic institutions which often reflect the views of wider society. The intrinsic value to society of specific areas of academic study, and the degrees that individuals hold within those subjects, is often driven by economic considerations. For incoming students and their families, often focusing (inevitably and understandably) on their long-term employment options, the potential careers which their degree programme can allow them access to are important. Underlying these judgements are two assumptions. Firstly, that a degree programme leads to a specific career (such as those studying politics will become a politician or those studying fine art will become an artist). For some that is true, but it is a far smaller number than many believe in the majority of academic subjects, both STEM and non-STEM. Secondly, the assumption is made that the monetary value of something is an accurate representation of its true value to society or to the individual, which is understandable but only part of the picture.

Andrew Gamble is one of several academics who argued that politics has a bad reputation but is also endlessly fascinating. He argued politics is often viewed as 'an endless drama of character and circumstances, and this is what drives news agendas

all over the world' (2019, p.3). However, beyond the fascination of the subject, it is vital to our understanding of civilization, the creation and solving of problems and fundamentally how we as a global society can survive. This article argues that political science specifically, and the humanities and social sciences more widely, is vital for individuals and for society and that the exclusive or predominant focus on mathematics and STEM subjects pursued by some politicians and newspaper outlets would, if it were successful, greatly damage society and create an educational system where many students were robbed of the opportunity to pursue their talents and interests unless they come from a background where they have the ability to pay for it without resorting to student loans. It also argues that political science is crucial to society in a number of ways, and that the focus on political science by politicians is one way in which they seek to denigrate their critics and deflect attention from their own actions, rather than a critique of the discipline in good faith. It is notable that the criticism of degrees and the wider 'culture wars' tend to coincide with difficult times for specific political parties where there is more need perhaps for them to deflect attention onto something else. Society at large, and individuals within it, needs their strengths to be recognised in a wide variety of academic subjects rather than being artificially forced to pursue purely numeric subjects. Beyond our understanding of society, we need to understand that people do not all fit into one category and a talent in one subject is just as valid as a talent in another subject, regardless of what those subject areas are. A great writer, for example, has no less value to society than a great scientist.

The terms 'social sciences' and 'humanities' are understood by many in fairly general terms, but the specific definitions vary hugely with no clear dividing line between the two broad areas. That is very much reflected in the different definitions and groupings created within UK universities, although it must be remembered that it is often administrative concerns that impact on the creation of specific faculty groupings. Social Sciences often including Politics, Sociology, Law, Criminology, Education, Journalism and Social Policy. Humanities is an even broader term which often includes English, Music, History, Modern Languages and Creative Design. However, even with these very loose categorisations, there will be differences of opinions on which subjects should be included where. History and Politics may be in the same faculty or even in the same large school in some universities, while in others they are in separate faculties. Programmes of study will vary from institution to institution making a direct comparison extremely difficult. While the outline of the humanities and social sciences is fairly clear, it is difficult to define clearly, and sometimes it is easier to explain what the terms mean by considering what they exclude. For the purposes of this article, both are included in the discussion as both the social sciences and humanities, despite their potential differences, face similar battles in terms of discussions over their value to society and the value of their degree programmes. Where political science is discussed, its definition as a social science or as a humanity is not the subject of the discourse.

A defence of the discipline

A UK newspaper once ran an animated TV advertisement set in a pub, where two figures sat having a drink. One said to the other that they didn't want to talk about politics, while the rest of the advert highlighted every aspect of their day and discussion which touched on politics. The point of the advert, besides selling newspapers, was to highlight how politics impacts on all aspects of daily life. For many, UK politics is the battle between the two main political parties, when in actual fact, as we know, the study of political science is far more vast and wide-ranging. As a long-standing democracy, it is easy to forget how fragile the political system can be and how easily it can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. In the UK, huge portions of our political system rely not on rules or laws but on expectations and tradition, elements which can be ignored if there is a lack of understanding of their importance or their relevance, as has been seen in the USA.

Beyond the impact of politics on our everyday lives, the study of the academic field of political science allows our students to develop important skills which are needed in the workforce. While subject specific knowledge can and is useful for many sectors of the British economy, the development of skills within university education is key for many sectors. The social sciences and humanities rarely lead to a direct employment field for their students, and therefore the 'employability' of their students comes from those skills and abilities, developed and encouraged while in higher education. Universities are now required by the Office for Students to ensure that they 'deliver successful outcomes for all of [their] students which are recognised and valued by employers and/or enable further study' (OfS website). Indeed, this has been recognised in the UK within the Subject Benchmarking Statement, which establishes the baseline expectations of degree subjects, where employability or skill building has now been accepted as a new element which must be included. As a nation with a large service sector, the importance of these skills—which include vital communication skills, critical analysis skills, the ability to conduct research and present findings in user-friendly ways and the ability to synthesise different approaches and priorities together—is vital to many sectors of the British economy but particularly the service sector. Without social science and humanities graduates, it is difficult to see how those businesses and organisations could function as effectively.

However, the focus on employability skills and the lived experience of politics should not undermine the vital importance of political science as an academic discipline. While once the study of political science was often bundled up with other subjects (such as history, philosophy or geography for example), Political Science, International Relations and International Development are vital subjects in their own right. Teaching on a wide range of issues which are vital for today's society, experts in Political Science offer contributions on all aspects of life. They contribute to discussions on party politics, climate change politics, conflict between and within states, peace-building, democratic arrangements, development across the world, all aspects of global political economy and different

theoretical approaches to modern day issues such as human rights or equality, to name just a few. Without these contributions, progress on the key issues of our time would be considerably slower and far more difficult. Any issue, whether it be a scientific development, a global geographical change or a political upheaval, exists in isolation. Excluding one subject area from discussion because it is contentious or overtly political would make for a poorer understanding of the world in which we live.

Is political science important for society?

While political science and international relations could be considered an established subject within higher education, its continued existence in its current format is not guaranteed. Whether it be as a single subject or as part of a joint honours degree (notably PPE), the study of politics within universities is firmly established but still remains contentious and often criticised. As UK governments have introduced tuition fees and those have increased, the need for degree programmes to justify their continued existence and their 'value' has increased. While there is an assumption that some, particularly STEM subjects, lead to a specific employment sector (although that is not always accurate), for social sciences the link to specific sectors can be more difficult to establish. That lack of a direct field of employment can lead some to query the value of a degree in political science, or the social sciences more generally (for example, McTague 2015, where students were asked about the value of their degrees and their answers focused on their time in a classroom, which is often less than those in lab based activities, or Clark 2014, where students were asked about the 'future-proof' nature of their degrees where STEM subjects topped the poll while History and English were at the bottom of the table). This focus on the perceived value of degrees was perhaps most evident in 2021 when the Department for Education moved funding from specific creative arts degree programmes to STEM and Medicine programmes (Weale 2021).

Putting aside the wider issue of student fees generally, this approach by the government could easily be seen as a way of ensuring that those who require government funding to complete their degree programmes (which is many young people) are being encouraged, or even pushed, into STEM subjects, while arts subjects (and potentially humanities and social sciences) could become degrees only open to those with the ability to fund their own studies, or those coming from families who can provide funding for them. Should the arts model be advanced elsewhere, this would undoubtedly damage the financial basis of many universities and make humanities and social science degrees appear even more elitist and 'decorative' (where the degree has no intrinsic value) than is currently the case. With the prioritisation of maths and other STEM subjects by the current government, the humanities and social sciences are having to work harder than ever to justify their existence, and their importance, within UK society and higher education. STEM subjects are also open to attack from different groups in society, but the battles they face are different to those in the humanities and social sciences.

Inevitably, in many societies, practical skills are often prized. Those practical skills do not need to be backed with a university degree, but within the UK many sectors now require university degrees in related subjects as an indicator of knowledge of the subject and an understanding of the underlying principles and theories or, more often, as an indicator of aptitude in the generalised area. While it is useful for an individual to have a degree in the specific subject (and some employers and sectors do require that), for many, having a degree in a STEM subject will be adequate for them to enter the workforce and then be trained while in their position. Indeed, having a degree in the required subject does not mean that an individual comes into the workforce fully trained, something which universities and employers have been working on for many years to resolve. However, for those with degrees in the social sciences, that option is rarely open to them.

One key element missing from the bipolarity of the debate between the humanities and social sciences and STEM subjects is the inherent complementarity of those fields. For a society to specialise in only one would be damaging, and while there is undoubtedly economic value in technology, science and engineering, there is also value in the tertiary sector where social sciences and humanities have importance. A social scientist cannot tell you how to build a nuclear reactor or a skyscraper, but they can tell you about the important issues in the local area, the local people and the political battles you many need to face in order to secure either one, as well as the social implications of your construction plans. To separate the social and physical sciences is to damage both, and society at large. As individuals, we often gravitate towards either the hard sciences and maths or the social sciences and humanities. For those individuals, their preference is often informed by their strengths and weaknesses and to, therefore, prevent or discourage students from studying their chosen subjects in their chosen fields based on a faulty determination of their worth will devalue and potentially damage many individuals. Not everyone can be a mathematician, and not everyone can be a political scientist—within any society there is surely value in both.

What are we teaching our students?

One of the key criticisms which the humanities and particularly social sciences face is over the content of our programmes and courses. Many of the issues which we cover are contentious and the position taken can often be influenced by both political persuasion and the political climate within a nation. Additionally, many deal with the issue of identity—whether that be the identity of an individual and their right to choose that, the identity of a group and how they are identified by others, or even the identity of a nation and what it ascribes to its national character and its historic legacy. For those of us within the field, whether that be as academics teaching and researching these areas, practitioners working within them or for students of them, we recognise the difference between our opinions and our academic voice. The very nature of our profession and our studies requires us to be able to view an argument from both sides, indeed to be able to argue both sides convincingly. We have to be able to articulate and justify positions we do not personally agree with,

even viewpoints we may find uncomfortable or abhorrent, in the pursuit of greater understanding and knowledge. Our political opinions are not left at the door, but they are massively tempered within a classroom and within our research as they are of little value to our audience.

However, the political climate in which we exist can infiltrate our classrooms and research, and often this happens deliberately. As we, as a society or as a nation, re-evaluate and reconsider our values we often begin to re-evaluate our past. This re-evaluation usually enables us to rethink accepted truths and expand our understanding of the past. We explore different ways of viewing our history or our past actions and try to provide a more rounded picture. This is not a perfect process and the way in which subjects are viewed and evaluated changes, meaning there is no one static point of reference, no eternal truth, but that is the beauty of society—that we adapt and change over time. However, this evolution has repeatedly been viewed negatively. Critique and criticism of the past can, to some individuals, appear unpatriotic, when in fact, creating a more accurate picture of a nation's past, is linked to interest in that nation and the desire to understand it in more depth, with increasing accuracy (for example Ibekwe 2022 discussing the work of academic David Olusoga). This is not a new phenomenon. It has happened repeatedly over the course of our history but in its current form, it is often focused on the issue of identity. Whether it be the discussion of trans-rights or decolonizing the curriculum, there are some who object to the changes being made in the teaching of specific subjects to make them more inclusive. The changes are driven by that desire, and while it might be a feature of a healthy society to debate inclusivity within academic bounds, to close down that discussion is problematic. Learning cannot and should not be a stationary activity with a pre-determined end point. For social sciences and humanities, there is no one fixed point of truth, no 'right' answer. It is necessary for us to explore different approaches and viewpoints, many of which we inevitably will not personally agree with. For some, this is hugely contentious and demonstrates a lack of understanding in the process of teaching and learning and in our individual subject areas. Paul Goodman, writing for the Conservative Home website argued that, 'On the one hand, this new way of thinking, having dissed the western civilisational project, also chucks out a conviction integral to it—the belief in objective truth' (Goodman, 23rd June 2023, Conservative Home). In one sense, of course, Goodman is correct. There are 'facts' which cannot be sensibly disputed. However, for many university degrees, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, facts are a small part of what we teach. The ability to recount dates and names is important, but not worthy of a university degree. Instead, we expect students to use 'facts' to support their arguments, something which does not have 'an objective truth'.

Conclusion

Despite academic rivalries, many within academia (and outside it) recognise the inherent interconnectedness of different disciplines. They also often recognise that one discipline cannot and should not be prioritised over another, either because of the value it adds to society or because of the different strengths of

those practitioners of it. A world which consisted only of STEM subjects would be very poor indeed, as would one which prioritised only social sciences and humanities. However, those subjects which focus on the more contentious parts of society, be they historical, political, social or cultural, often find themselves in the firing line of those who wish to close down debate. While a certain amount of resilience exists, sustained attacks, particularly those by governments, can severely weaken the study and research in those areas by defunding them and reducing the number of students able to study for them.

Political science often finds itself the target for criticism, by both students and politicians alike. For some, the variety of topics, and particularly the sensitivity of those topics, can be a cause for concern and upset. Discussing contentious issues such as the conflict in Israel and the Palestinian territories, the rights of different groups vis-à-vis each other, the decolonizing of the curriculum, the legacy of the British Empire, all of these are both hard to discuss and can be very hard to engage with. It is the job of academics to ensure that discussion and exploration of these topics, like all other topics, is done with respect to others, understanding and sensitivity. However, we cannot shy away from subjects because we find them tricky—indeed that may be the best reason to explore them and discuss areas of misunderstanding and contention, but this is done in a safe and welcoming environment of exploration rather than a combative argument over who is right and who is wrong. Besides the importance of the content of political science programmes, and the important research which is undertaken in the field, our students are equipped with transferable skills which make them incredibly valuable to business and service sector industries. While the value of a degree may not only lie in the skills it develops, these skills are vital for students seeking employment at the end of their time at university.

While it is important for humanities and social sciences to retain a place in the heart of academia, it is also crucial that we preserve our place in the heart of society and civilisation. By examining the cultural, historic, political and societal elements of our society, we enable citizens to critique and evaluate the evidence and rhetoric placed in front of them. We give them additional important tools to recognise the difference between 'truth' and 'opinion', differentiate actual 'fake news' from the news which is real but not palatable to some, and determine which 'facts' are actual facts and which are opinions dressed up with confidence in their delivery. We have a moral responsibility to civilisation to be the observers, the critical group—to maintain a tradition which dates back to the beginnings of society. Politics 'is only a small part of what human life is about. But it still frames everything we do. It is an ineradicable part of living together.' (Gamble 2019, p. 14). The humanities and social sciences are not 'better' or 'more important' than any of the other disciplines, although some of us like them more, but they are just as important and that fact must not be diminished for political convenience or advantage by anyone.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Alasdair Blair for all of his support while writing this article. All errors are, of course, my own.

Funding N/A.

References

Clark, Laura. 2014 'Science is the most "future proof" degree: Engineering and Chemistry seen as courses likely to lead to an adaptable career', *Daily Mail*. Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2889496/Science-future-proof-degree.html. Accessed on 25 October 2023.

Gamble, Andrew. 2019. *Politics: Why it matters*. John Wiley & Sons.

Goodman, Paul. 2023. 'The question isn't whether conservatives should fight cultures wars or not. It's how.' *Conservative Home*. Available at: https://conservativehome.com/2023/06/23/the-conservatives-are-caught-up-in-culture-wars-whether-they-like-it-or-not-how-should-they-respond/. Accessed 27 October 2023.

Gopal, Priyamvada. 2023. 'Oh, the humanities!', *Prospect.* Available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/policy/education/university/63701/oh-the-humanities. Accessed 16th February 2024.

Haynes, Tom. 2024. 'The Mickey Mouse degrees that could damage your career prospects', *The Daily Telegraph*. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/consumer-affairs/worst-university-degrees-damage-career-prospects/ Accessed 23 July 2024.

Ibekwe, Desiree. 2022. 'David Olusoga wants Britain to face its past. All of it', *New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/arts/television/david-olusoga-black-history.html. Accessed 16th February 2024.

McTague, Tom. 2015. 'Half of the first graduates forces to pay (9,000 a year for university say their degrees were NOT worth the money', *Daily Mail*. Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3134359/Half-graduates-forced-pay-9-000-year-university-say-degrees-NOT-worth-money.html. Accessed 25th October 2023.

Office for Students. 2024. *What the OfS does for students*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-outcomes-and-employability/what-the-ofs-does-for-graduates/. Accessed 23 July 2024.

Preston, Alex. 2015. 'The war against humanities at Britain's universities', *The Guardian.* Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities. Accessed 16th February 2024.

Sunak, Rishi. 2023. Prime Minister o0utlines his vision for Maths to 18, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-outlines-his-vision-for-maths-to-18. Accessed 16 February 2024.

Weale, Sally. 2021. Funding Cuts to go ahead for university arts courses in England despite opposition , *The Guardian*, Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/20/funding-cuts-to-go-ahead-for-university-arts-courses-in-england-despite-opposition. Accessed 25th October 2023.

Victoria C. Honeyman My primary research interest is British Politics, with a particular specialism in British foreign policy. I have written extensively on the foreign policy objectives of both the Conservative and Labour Parties. I served as Chair of the British International Studies Association Foreign Policy Specialist Group between 2014 and 2018. After stepping down, I was elected as a member of the APSA British Politics Group Executive Committee. I am Co-Chair of the Political Studies Association's

Learning and Teaching Network and was a member of the Subject Benchmark Statement Working Group. I work extensively with the media, providing expert analysis for BBC News and Breakfast, Channel 5, Al Jazeera, France 24, Radio 5 Live and Radio 4 amongst others. I also work extensively with members of the Associated Press. I have also written for the UK in a Changing Europe Group, the Foreign Policy Centre and the Conversation website.