

The Profession

Political Science Departments Report Declines in Enrollments and Majors in Recent Years

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Trends in undergraduate student enrollments and degrees in political science over the last 15 years is a good news/bad news story. The bad news that provides the current headline is generating lively exchanges among political science faculty on the PSRT-L since May. It may be that, with the considerable increase in high school graduates expected over the next decade, the decrease in students selecting political science courses and majors will turn around. But many reasons offered by faculty for the decline are worth explicating and examining especially because enrollments in Ph.D. programs are increasing, necessitating an expansion, not a contraction, of faculty positions. Data from the APSA's *Annual Survey of Political Science Departments* for the 1980 through 1995 academic years are presented here in order to inform faculty discussions and responses to the fall off in student interest in political science.

Figures 1 and 2 display the proportion of political science departments reporting increases in enrollment and degrees in political science from 1980 through 1995. The enrollment trends are reported by type of department according to the highest degree awarded and the number of faculty in graduate departments and distinguishing between public and private institutions for undergraduate departments. These two figures illustrate that from 1986 to 1991, considerable majorities of departments in nearly every category, from Ph.D. to undergraduate departments, reported increases in both undergrad-

uate student enrollments in their courses and political science undergraduate degrees. Prior to 1986, departmental trends in enrollments and degrees are mixed, with greater proportions of graduate departments reporting increasing student interest in political science.

The discipline's experience of welcoming increasing numbers of students for several years exacerbates the change in enrollments and majors of the last few years. From 1991-92 through 1994-95, there is a dramatic reduction in the proportion of departments reporting increases in enrollments or bachelors' degrees in political science. Save for the masters departments in 1991-92, fewer than 50% of departments report any increases in student enrollments and degrees, with Ph.D. departments, especially the larger departments, showing the largest fall off in undergraduate enrollments and majors.

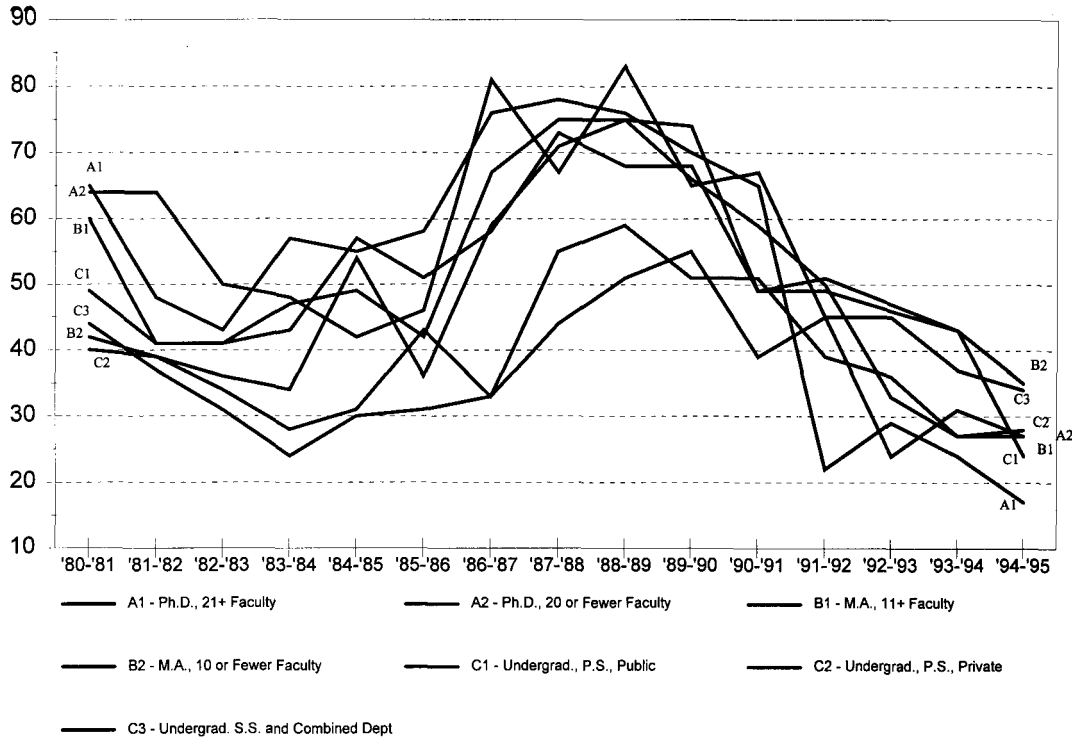
The data on the proportion of departments reporting decreases in enrollments and undergraduate degrees in the same time period, 1980-1995, confirm the rise and fall off in the appeal of political science to undergraduate students. The data, also organized according to the type of department, presented in Figures 3 and 4 show how few departments experienced decreases in enrollments or majors in the latter half of the 1980's only to do so in the 1990's.

The Association's annual surveys also collect data for enrollments in introductory and major subfield courses, although this question is now included on a rotating basis. The latest data on enrollments for

these courses is for the 1993-94 academic year. A comparison of these data with data on course enrollments for the 1980's shows that the decrease in enrollments was registered by courses in all fields. Political science departments are encouraged to compile data on their own enrollments and degrees for comparison with data for other social science and humanities disciplines in their institutions, as well as with applied degree programs, such as communications and business, if these are offered.

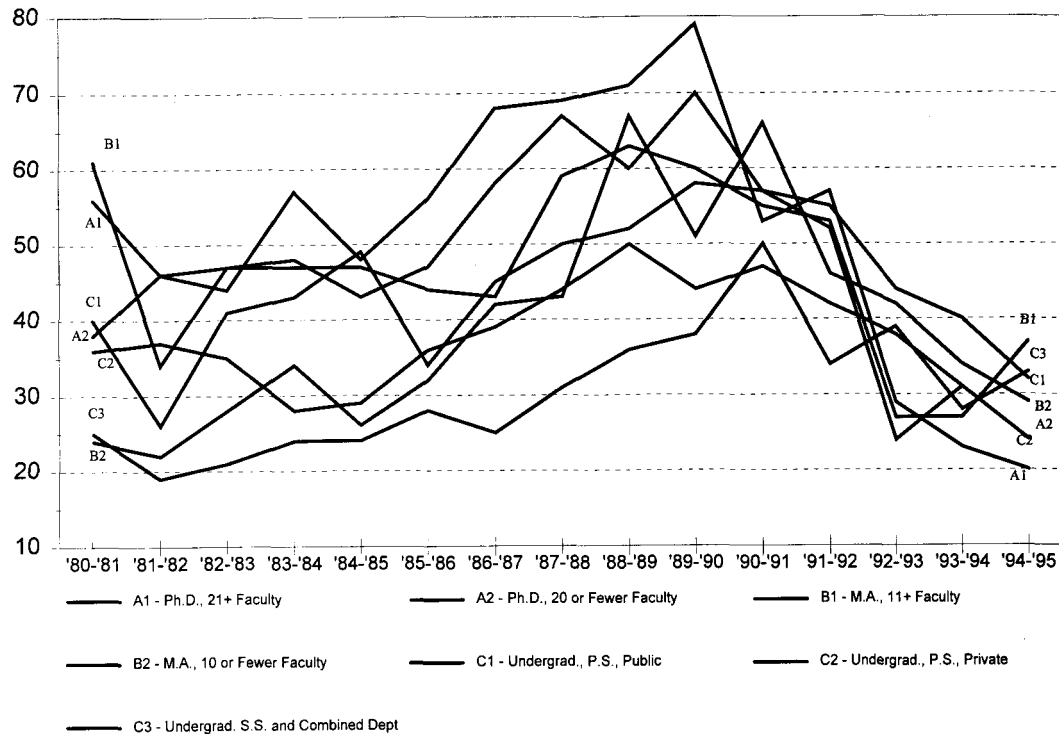
Data on probable major field of study from the annual surveys of entering college freshmen are further proof of a decline in the discipline's appeal to students. The *Annual Surveys of Entering College Freshmen*, which have been conducted for three decades, are a useful indicator of students' selection of majors, notwithstanding the reality of considerable change in choices by individual students. Figure 5 summarizes data on the proportion of freshmen likely to major in political science from the 1986 through 1995 surveys for all higher education institutions and for major institutional categories. In each category, the percentage of freshmen reporting they intend to be a political science major began to increase in 1987 or 1988 for two to three years, only to decrease beginning in 1992. For universities, 5.2% of the 1988 freshmen were probable majors compared to 3.4% of the 1995 freshmen. For four year colleges and Black colleges, 3.7% and 4.9% respectively of the 1988 freshmen were likely majors compared with 2.4% and 3.0% respectively of

FIGURE 1—Percent of Departments Reporting Increases in Total Enrollments in Undergraduate Political Science Courses, 1980–1995

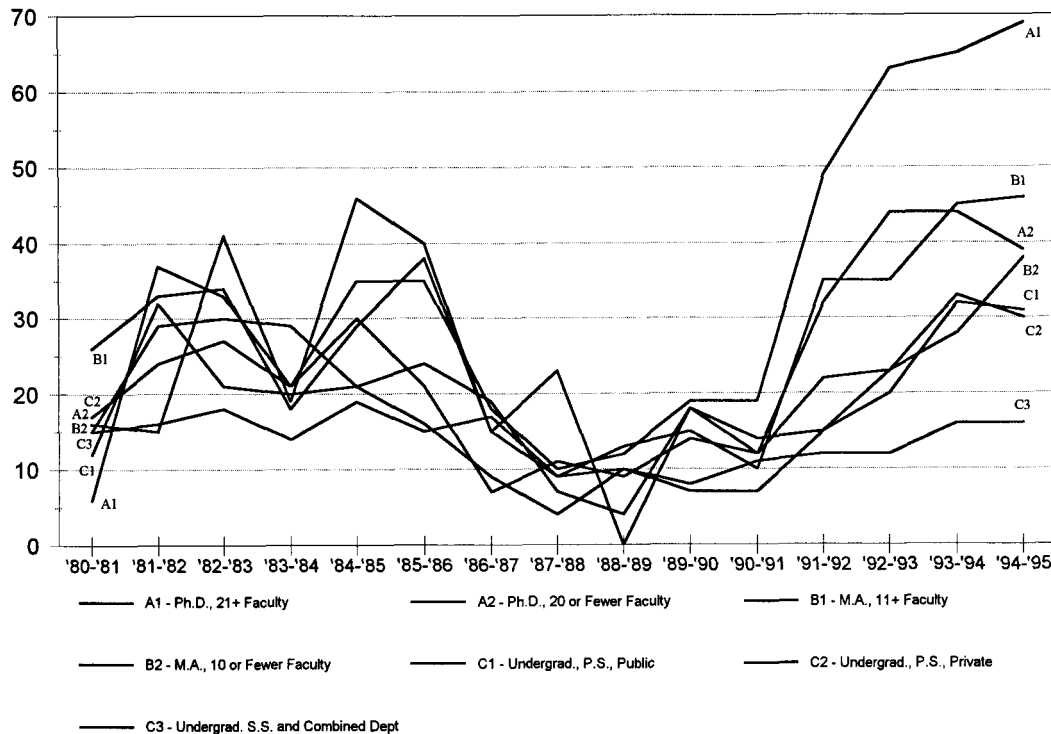


Source: Data from the Annual Survey of Political Science Departments concluded and published for each academic year by the American Political Science Association as reported in surveys from 1981–82 through 1995–96.

FIGURE 2—Percent of Departments Reporting Increases in Number of Undergraduate Degrees Awarded from the Previous Year, 1980–1995



Source: Data from the Annual Survey of Political Science Departments concluded and published for each academic year by the American Political Science Association as reported in surveys from 1981–82 through 1995–96.

FIGURE 3—Percent of Departments Reporting Decreases in Enrollments from the Previous Year, 1980–1995

Source: Data from the Annual Survey of Political Science Departments concluded and published for each academic year by the American Political Science Association as reported in surveys from 1981–82 through 1995–96.

the 1995 freshmen. Table 1 shows the percentage of 1995 freshmen who are probable political science majors for a more specific set of institutional categories. The difference between the discipline's appeal to students in public and private institutions is not characteristic of other social science and humanities disciplines.

Political scientists sharing enrollment data on the PSRT-L and/or commenting on the changing student attraction to the study of the discipline propose different but not mutually exclusive, causes for the decrease in student interest. A summary of their proposals follows, accompanied by some other data. The explanations that faculty offer for the downturn in student involvement with political science can be categorized by "source" as due to: political science curricula and political science faculty; career choices of students; and political socialization and climate. A review of each explanation follows in turn.

Political Science Curricula and Faculty

Many contributors to the PSRT-L discussion of declining enrollments suggest the trend can be attributed to political science curricula and how faculty treat undergraduates. More commentators blamed the decline in enrollments on what political scientists and their departments are or are not doing than on other causes. Specific factors proposed in this category are:

- A lack of communication about the importance of political science intellectually, vocationally, and in civic well being (Schmidt).
- A lack of rigor and a cumulative structure in the curriculum (Casper).
- An inadequate job of orienting, advising, and assessing students (Schmidt).
- A hostility to applied political science and applied political scientists (Koehler) and a consequent failure to make a connection between political science and jobs (Wetstein).
- A focus on research at the ex-

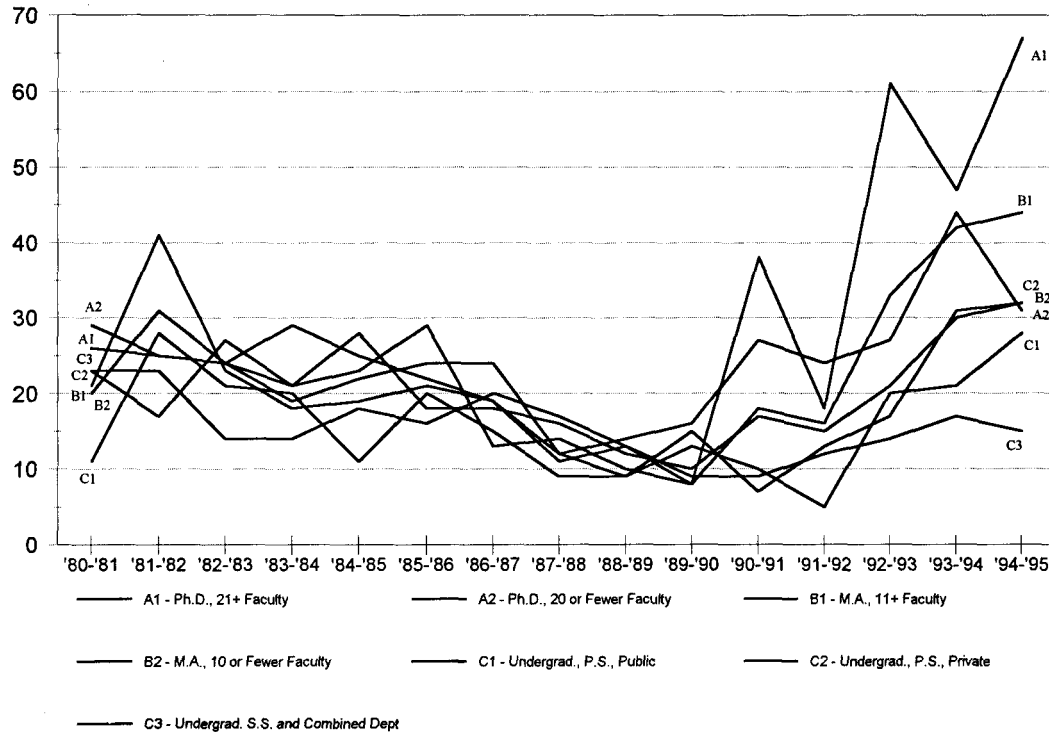
pense of teaching and the quantitative techniques emphasized in graduate education (Julian).

- A tougher set of requirements and grading standards which discourages students (Kay, Rush).¹

Political Science Enrollments and Degrees Reflect Student Choices about Careers and the Appeal of Other Majors

The most frequent explanation in this category attributes the decline of the popularity of political science to a decline in law school applications. The data on the trends in applications to law schools in Figure 6 provide support for this factor. The connection with law school applications also occurred during the late 1980's when political science enrollments were going up. Robert Carr, Director, Data Services at the Law School Admissions Council, reports that law school applications "bottomed out" between 1984-86, went up until 1990-91, and then started to decline. He anticipates a further 10%

FIGURE 4—Percent of Departments Reporting Decreases in the Number of Undergraduate Degrees from the Previous Year, 1980–1995



Source: Data from the Annual Survey of Political Science Departments concluded and published for each academic year by the American Political Science Association as reported in surveys from 1981–82 through 1995–96.

decline in applications for the 1995-96 academic year.

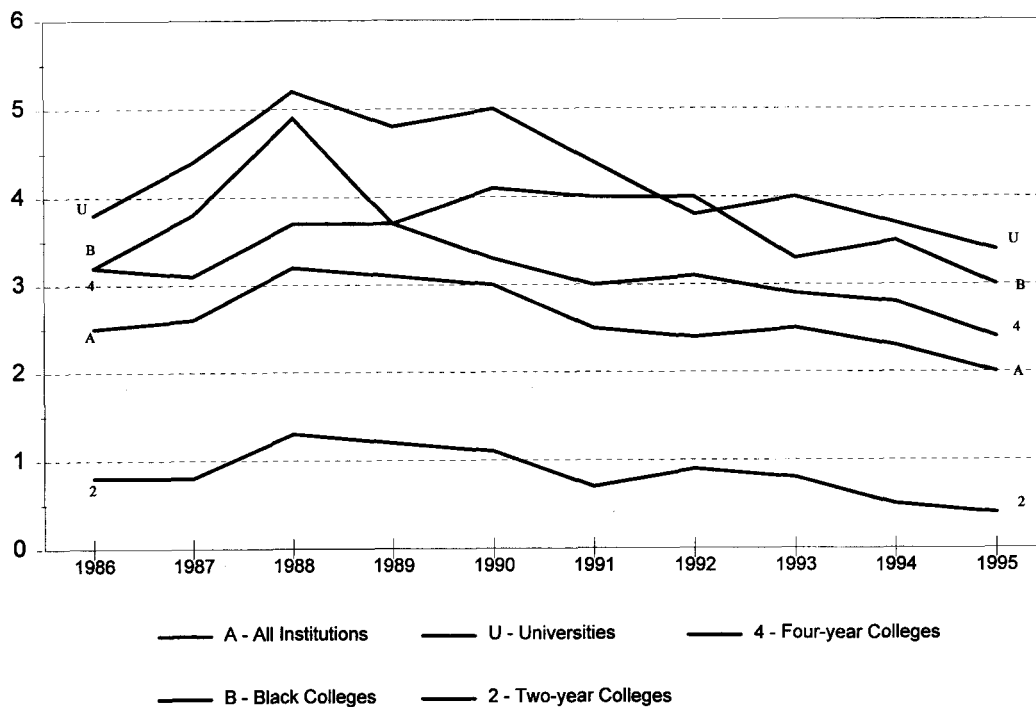
Political science departments and faculty can be concerned not only about the fall out from a decrease in student interest in pre-law but about the discipline's "share" of the applications. Carr confirms that political science is the largest undergraduate major among law school applicants in any given year over the last decade. Political science majors account for from two to three times as great a proportion of the law school applications as any other undergraduate major, accounting for as much as 20% of the applicants. Since 1990, the proportion of applicants majoring in political science has been below 20% as low as 17.8% in 1990-91 and no higher than 18.9%, each year from 1991 to 1994, and 18.7% in 1994-95. Departments may want to determine whether decreases in enrollments are notably greater for courses in public law and judicial process, and whether they are advising fewer pre-law students. Political science departments may well find it in their interest to be

involved in college or university wide pre-law advising in order to recruit students.

A few discussants attributed the declines in enrollments and majors to students' preferences for other liberal arts majors, including history, sociology, and English. (Beckwith) or to students' preferences for pre-professional, applied degrees (Rush). The annual surveys of entering college freshmen conducted and directed by Alexander Astin and the Higher Education Research Institute for UCLA and the American Council on Education (Astin 1966 through 1994; Sax 1995) and the composite study, *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends, 1966-1990* (Dey 1991), provide some data for comparing the popularity of political science as a probably major field of study with that of other social science and humanities disciplines as well as applied programs. Throughout the 1980's, the proportion of students planning to major in political science and psychology, increased notably. In 1980, 2.0% and 2.2% of freshmen entering all higher educa-

tion institutions intended to major in political science and psychology, respectively. By 1990, 3.0% and 4.2% of the freshmen intended to major in political science and psychology, respectively. The proportion of students intending to major in other social science and humanities disciplines are far lower than for political science and psychology. Economics and geography retained comparable proportions of likely majors. Anthropology and sociology gained .1% to register .2% and .4%. History gained .3% to register .9% in 1990 and English gained .4% from 1980 to register 1.3% in 1990. For comparison, the applied degrees in business, which have larger proportions of student majors rose slightly in the mid 1980s only to decline. Whereas 23.9% of the entering freshmen in 1980 indicated the preference for business, 21.1% of the 1990 class of entering freshmen did so (Dey 1991). Table 2 indicates the selection of probable majors among social science and selected humanities disciplines for freshmen entering all colleges and universities last

FIGURE 5—Entering College Freshmen Choosing Political Science as a Probable Major Field of Study, 1986–1995



Source: Data compiled from the annual surveys: *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall* from 1986–1995. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

fall. While student interest in the political science major declined by over one-third, no discipline showed any considerable increase in probable majors, and the per-

centage of students planning to be psychology majors declined by .3%. Business was identified as a probable major by 16.3% of the 1995 freshmen, a decline of nearly 4% from the share of probable majors of the 1990 freshmen.

There is a recent increase in education majors and interest in careers in pre-college teaching. There should be opportunities for political science departments to encourage elementary education majors as well as high school social studies education majors to enroll in courses that prepare them to teach civics and government.

Political Science Is Vulnerable to the Political Climate

Several contributors to the PSRT-L discussion contend that the well documented decrease in both the public’s trust in government and interest in public affairs are sentiments that are shared by larger proportions of younger Americans and are a significant source of why political science is not attracting as many students (Beckwith, Bennett, Entessah, Gar-

cia, and Kelman). An examination of the annual surveys of entering college freshmen conducted by Alexander, Astin, and colleagues at UCLA (1995) confirms a continual decline in the proportion of students reporting an interest in discussing public affairs; only 15% of the freshman entering college in 1995 said they are interested in public affairs. The 1995 report states that “keeping up to date with political affairs” is an important life goal, in comparison with 42% of the 1990 freshmen and 58% of the 1966 freshmen. The surveys record a modest rise in student activism in the early 1990’s but less student interest in “influencing the political structure” and “influencing social values” and “participating in community action programs” since 1992 which is coincidental with the decline in political science enrollments and majors (1995).

Further investigation of the connection between students’ diffuse support for government and interest in public affairs and an earlier exposure to the study of government and politics and the decision

TABLE 1
Percent Entering College Students Choosing Political Science as a Major Field of Study by Type of Institution

| | All Freshmen | Men | Women |
|---------------------|--------------|-----|-------|
| Universities | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.4 |
| Public | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Private | 6.4 | 6.3 | 6.4 |
| 4-Year Colleges | 2.4 | 2.5 | 2.3 |
| Public | 1.8 | 2.0 | 1.7 |
| Non Sect. (Private) | 3.3 | 2.9 | 3.6 |
| Protestant | 2.9 | 3.1 | 2.7 |
| Catholic | 3.1 | 3.4 | 2.9 |
| Black Colleges | 3.0 | 3.1 | 3.0 |
| Public | 2.4 | 2.2 | 2.5 |
| Private | 4.6 | 5.0 | 4.4 |
| 2-Year Colleges | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.4 |
| Public | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.3 |
| Private | 0.9 | 0.8 | 1.1 |
| All Institutions | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |

Source: Sax, L.J., Astin, A.W., Korn, W.S., Mahoney, K.M. (1995). *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

TABLE 2
Percent Entering College Freshmen Choices of Probable Major Field of Study Among Social Science and Selected Humanities Disciplines in Universities, 4-Year Colleges and Black Colleges, 1995

| | Universities | | | 4-Year Colleges | | | Black Colleges | | | 2-Year Colleges | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-----|-----|-----------------|-----|-----|----------------|-----|-----|-----------------|-----|-----|
| | All | M | W | All | M | W | All | M | W | All | M | W |
| Anthropology | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.1 |
| Economics | 0.6 | 0.9 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| English L & L | 1.7 | 1.2 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 1.3 | 2.2 | 1.8 | 1.2 | 2.2 | 0.6 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Geography | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.0 |
| History | 1.1 | 1.3 | 0.8 | 1.1 | 1.5 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.7 | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.6 | 0.2 |
| Lang. & Lit. | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.3 |
| Philosophy | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.0 |
| Political Science | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 2.4 | 2.5 | 2.3 | 3.0 | 3.1 | 3.0 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.4 |
| Psychology | 4.2 | 2.0 | 6.1 | 4.8 | 2.4 | 6.7 | 5.1 | 2.1 | 6.8 | 2.6 | 1.5 | 3.6 |
| Sociology | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.9 | 0.5 | 1.1 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.5 |
| Other Soc. Sci. | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.3 |

Source: Sax, L.J., Astin, A.W., Korn, W.S., Mahoney, K.M. (1995). *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

to study political science in college is warranted. A few faculty contributions to the PSRT-L discussion suggested examining whether what and how we teach about politics discourages students' political engagement. For example, does critical analysis or rational choice theory encourage cynicism (Kelman)? To what degree are textbooks treating political leaders more critically and turning students off politics? Is

the well documented decline in popular regard for U.S. national governmental institutions and officials associated with greater declines in enrollments in courses on American institutions, politics, and policies?

In my contribution to the PSRT-L discussion, I suggested that political scientists should investigate whether there is an association between state mandates for pre-col-

lege civics and government courses and college students' interest in political science. Currently, only 17 states require K-12 instruction in civics and/or government. Data collected by the Educational Testing Service for the Advanced Placement program show that college students are more likely to register in courses in a discipline they have studied in high school. It may be that, contrary to conventional wisdom, high school government courses do not "turn students off" or satiate their interest in politics.

The considerable attention given by faculty participating in the PSRT-L exchanges to examining whether political science research interests, curricula, and approaches to teaching bear a share of responsibility for declining undergraduate enrollments and majors did yield some suggestions for strategies to appeal to students, including: enlivening the introductory courses by assigning these to our "best" professors; offering small discussion sections to accompany lectures to large student audiences; and telling students that political science is a field that trains them well for an information driven, global economy.

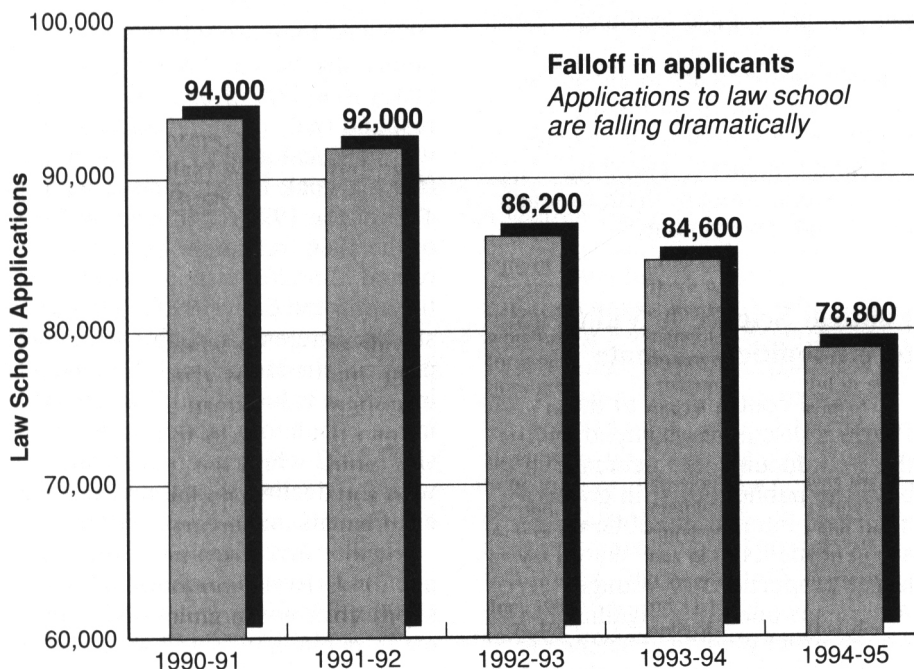
A 1996 Annual Meeting session, held in conjunction with the Conference of Political Science Chairs, will be devoted to discussing the reports of decreasing undergraduate enrollments in political science courses and how faculty, departments, and the APSA might respond. A report on this discussion will appear in the December 1996 issue of *PS*. Faculty are invited to send comments and suggestions to inform and extend consideration of this topic.

Notes

1. Contributors to the PSRT-L discussion in May, many whose observations encouraged this report directly and are attributed in this report include:

Karen Beckwith, Wooster College
 Steven E. Bennett, University of Cincinnati
 Michael Berheide, Berea College
 Robert J. Bobic, University of Tennessee (Ph.D. candidate)
 Steven Casper, Cornell University
 Nader Entessar, Spring Hill College

FIGURE 6—Law School Applications, 1990-95



Source: U.S. News and World Report. 1996 *America's Best Graduate Schools*. Page 21.

Chris Garcia, University of New Mexico
 Ariana Julian, University of California, Davis
 Susan Kay, Miami University, Ohio
 Gary Klass, Illinois State University
 Gus Koehler, California Research Bureau
 Steven Kelman, Harvard University (on leave, working in the government)
 Norman Luttbeg, Texas A&M University
 Albert Matheny, University of Florida
 Melinda Mueller, Eastern Illinois University
 Gary Nederman, University of Arizona
 Vincent K. Pollard, University of Hawaii (Ph.D. candidate)
 David Rausch, Fairmont State College

Mark Rush, Washington and Lee University
 Steffen Schmidt, Iowa State University
 Aron Tannenbaum, Clemson University
 Jean Torcum, California State University, Sacramento
 Elliot Vittes, University of Central Florida
 Matthew Wetstein, California State University, Stanislaus
 Oliver H. Woshinsky, University of Southern Maine

My apologies to those whose comments I missed or received after this piece was written. Please send me your observations so that I can be sure to include them in the next issue. *PS* welcomes essays with additional analysis and commentary.

References

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- Dey, Eric L., Alexander W. Astin, and William S. Korn. 1991. *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends, 1966-1990*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Sax, L. J., A. W. Astin, W. S. Korn and K. M. Mahoney. 1995. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall, 1995*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

The Challenge of Campaign Watching: Seven Lessons of Participant-Observation Research¹

James M. Glaser, *Tufts University*

When the term “participant-observation” comes up, many political scientists immediately think of Richard Fenno. Indeed, Fenno’s description of his work as “soaking and poking” has become synonymous with this style of research. When I sought to do research based on participant-observation techniques, it was natural to turn to Fenno and, quite fortuitously, he gave a series of lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, where I was a graduate student, just as I was preparing to do research for my doctoral dissertation. In his talks, which were later published as a book (Fenno 1990), he spoke of some of the problems and difficulties of participant-observation work. His comments were invaluable to me as I prepared to visit Mississippi and Alabama to do my initial fieldwork.

While my notes from his talks were dogeared and weathered by the end of that year, there were times when even my “bible” could not help me. I encountered new problems and fresh issues because my task was basically different. Like Fenno, I was studying congressional politics but, unlike him, I was examining campaigns, not politicians.

This difference had important

consequences. It meant that rather than doing research both in and out of campaign season, I did my work in that crazy period of time right before an election. While Fenno spent intensive amounts of time travelling districts and states with one congressional incumbent and eschewed covering opponents, I tried to interview and spend time with competing candidates as they battled for an open seat. Fenno could assure politicians that “within the scope of their political world, [he] recognized a single loyalty—to them” (72). I could not.

Much of Fenno’s general advice on conducting interviews, developing rapport, and keeping intellectual distance was still relevant to me. Nonetheless, another set of rules applied to my research. I was going to have to make my own mistakes—and plenty of them—as I learned to be an effective participant-observer in a different setting.

My project involved an intensive study of six special congressional elections held between 1980 to 1993 (three of which were witnessed first-hand, three of which were reconstructed through newspaper clippings and extensive interviews). In witnessing elections, I spent several weeks following candidates, and going to debates, rallies, com-

mercial tapings, church services, meetings with volunteers, press conferences, prayer breakfasts, and any other events I could manage to get into. I also interviewed actors in the drama—candidates, their campaign managers and media consultants, national party officials and local party volunteers, ministers and labor leaders, print and broadcast journalists, and whoever else I could get to talk with me. The results, I hope, are more than just reports of campaign dialogue, but more detailed depictions of the contests.

Such depictions can have much value. Many political scientists study elections and electoral behavior at their computers. While there is certainly nothing wrong with doing this (I do it too), to draw conclusions about electoral results or electoral behavior also requires some understanding of the context in which elections take place. As Herbert Simon (1985) writes, “To understand political choices, we need to understand where the frame of reference for the actors’ thinking comes from—how it is evoked. An important component of the frame of reference is the set of alternatives that are given consideration in the choice process. We need to understand not only