

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Social Science Makes Sense of the Institutions That Shape Our Lives

By Steven Rathgeb Smith, Executive Director, American Political Science Association

July 18, 2017

Throughout my career as a professor of public policy, public administration, and political science, I have been convinced of the value of social science, especially political science. For more than three decades my research has focused on the role nonprofit organizations play in public policy. This research is grounded in expanding our understanding of the relationship between government and nonprofits, including developing effective strategies for collaboration and partnership in support of innovation and social impact.

Since my appointment as Executive Director of the American Political Science Association in August 2013, I have been committed to broadening and deepening the impact of political science research in the advancement of knowledge. Indeed, social science research is fundamental to understanding—and making the best of—the world around us. As I work with our political scientist members, I have been impressed with the tremendous diversity of important research projects now underway, including why people vote, why states go to war (proven prevention techniques), effective strategies to teach citizenship in local communities, and improving the provision of public services. Overall, it is impossible to ignore the myriad ways in which social science helps us understand, create, and engage with the institutions that shape our lives.

Put simply, the social sciences are important because they create better institutions and systems that affect people's lives every day. Creating frameworks for understanding the origins and effects of regime type, the purpose of political parties, the reasons for polarization, the structure of social networks, the goals and structures of government agencies, or the challenges and opportunities faced by service providers and nonprofits are all attempts to make sense of structures that have real and profound on-the-ground impacts.

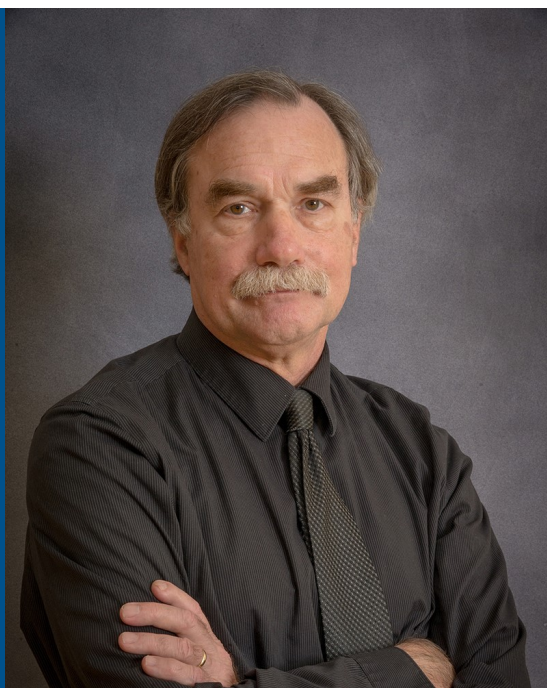
Importantly, social scientific approaches, whether they immerse researchers in new perspectives or systematically analyze and compare institutions and phenomena, often challenge “common-sense” or prevailing understandings. These studies provide a better evidence-based grounding for evaluating our social and political world. Clearer evidence and greater knowledge can help strengthen institutions by providing data for policy outcomes and better mechanisms for promoting civic participation and engagement.

Just as significant, beyond building more accurate and functional general understandings of the world and its institutions and social and political systems, social science helps *individuals* better understand how to engage with these systems both for their own and society's benefit. In a democracy, this understanding is crucial.

We recognize the importance of the natural sciences in investigating the physical world, including personal health, space travel, and improved transportation. However, the actual prevention of disease or the adoption of a new and improved public transit system is a political problem, requiring an understanding of political institutions, public management, and policy implementation. Thus, social sciences help people understand how to interact with the social world—how to influence policy, develop networks, increase government accountability, and promote democracy. These challenges, for many people around the world, are immediate, and their resolution can make a vast difference in people’s lives.

While many social science disciplines are important in helping people to understand and engage with the wide variety of institutions that shape their lives, political science is particularly valuable in helping people learn to be citizens. Through participating in government at all levels, holding lawmakers accountable, and upholding democratic norms and values, individuals must have the resources to understand how government works and how laws and regulations are made; evaluate policies and outcomes based on effectiveness and values; make informed decisions about policy preferences; and, especially, understand the importance of participating in government, from voting to protesting. Political scientists are essential in providing these resources, in classrooms and in the public sphere.

Consequently, political science, through teaching and research, provides a solid framework for understanding the political and social systems that shape our lives. Social science research tells us that effective public services, active participation in public policy, and engagement with local community organizations are very challenging if the government is not transparent and accountable and citizens are not sufficiently engaged. Thus, social science is important because it provides an evidence-based foundation on which to build a more effective government and democracy. **Why social science? Because it helps people understand and engage with the key political and social institutions, thus benefiting individuals and society as a whole.**



Steven Rathgeb Smith is the executive director of the American Political Science Association. Previously, he was the Louis A. Bantle Chair in Public Administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. He also taught for many years at the University of Washington where he was the Nancy Bell Evans Professor of Public Affairs at the Evans School of Public Affairs and director of the Nancy Bell Evans Center for Nonprofits & Philanthropy. In addition, he has taught at Georgetown, Duke, American University, and Washington University in St. Louis. From 1997 to 2004, he was editor of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly and, from 2006 to 2008, president of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action. Dr. Smith has authored and edited several books including, Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting (with Michael Lipsky), Governance and Regulation in the Third Sector: International Perspectives (co-edited with Susan Phillips) and, most recently, Nonprofits and Advocacy: Engaging Community and Government in an Era of Retrenchment (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) (co-edited with Robert Pekkanen and Yutaka Tsujinaka). He is currently president of the International Society for Third Sector Research.



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