
International Political Science

French Political Science

Nicole de Montricher

French political science is organized around two institutional poles, one made up of some 140 university professors, many of whom received public law degrees before turning to political science, and the other of some 100 full-time researchers. The latter generally work at research institutes under conditions similar to those at private research institutes in the United States. The highest concentrations of CNRS¹ researchers are at CERIP² and CEVIPOF³ in Paris, CERAT⁴ in Grenoble, CERVL⁵ in Bordeaux and CRESM⁶ in Aix-en-Provence.

In recent years, a number of researchers and educators have accepted active administrative positions. This is a significant trend, since French tradition calls for a fairly strict separation between the world of research and the world of politics and administration. Noteworthy exceptions to this rule have been certain important ministerial appointees, eminent educators and researchers such as Michel Crozier, Maurice Duverger, and George Vedel, who have taken on roles as government advisors. Increasingly, the research community seems to be accepting that the equilibrium between scientific legitimacy and social participation can be maintained while allowing greater osmosis between the sectors of action and reflection.

Conversely, the research community remains divided on the question of whether political science should be a homogeneous discipline reserved to the experts or a crossroads of science enriched by the diversity of other social sciences. Until the mid-1970s, and despite

some real conflict, political scientists generally agreed that "the political" should concentrate on the study of regimes and political parties, public opinions, and electoral behavior. Today, fields of investigation are considerably more diverse: linguists and computer scientists are researching political discourse; philosophers, historians, and even economists are explaining the origins of the modern State. Topics are multiplying, and scientists differ on how problems should be studied. In this respect, above and beyond the concepts proper to each of the disciplines laying claim to the study of politics, researchers disagree on the question of "methodological individualism." In the past, the influence of socioeconomic structures on individual behavior was often emphasized; today, an emerging school of thought accents the role of free will, not only in studying electoral behavior, but in explaining how institutions function.

The publication in 1985 of Grawitz and Leca's *Treatise on Political Science*, a collective work in four volumes, can be seen as an outgrowth of the will to define the territory of the discipline and the need for a compilation of investigational methods. The study reveals that there are French researchers representing almost every approach—not only history, sociology, economy, and philosophy, but functionalism and organizational theory, and even the construction of typologies or models. Most of the day-to-day developments in the discipline appear in two publications—*Revue française de Science politique* and *Pouvoirs*, whereas the Association Française de Science Politique is the major framework reuniting the research community.

In the area of subject matter, one of the strong points of French political science is the study of electoral behavior. For a long time after Andre Siegfried, researchers

highlighted weighty factors that were permanent enough to allow definition of a "right-wing France" and a "left-wing France," according to the hypothesis that a citizen's social and economic status determine his political opinions. In the past few years, electoral opinion has also been seen as a fabricated product, and current work is aimed at defining the elements and processes used to form it. A certain mobility in voting patterns has also been shown. Although the opposition between the Catholic Right and the Marxist Left has retained its full validity, studies of political socialization, in particular relative to voter age, have refined the knowledge of electoral behavior, and in a broader sense, political behavior, now studied from diverse points of view—socioeconomic, cultural, political, and also psychological and historical.

The research community seems to be accepting that the equilibrium between scientific legitimacy and social participation can be maintained while allowing greater osmosis between the sectors of action and reflection.

As elsewhere, a high percentage of French researchers are devoted to the practice of public opinion polls. It is important to point out that in France, almost all political polls are done using the quota method. Since 1986, the Observatoire Interregional du Politique⁷ has been conducting polls at regular intervals on political, social, economic, and cultural attitudes and opinions. Thus, a comparative data base is gradually being established.

Political scientists have been mobilized in another field of expertise, the study of how administrative and political institutions operate. Formerly monopolized by jurists, this field of investigation has been totally renovated by the intervention of sociologists. In particular, the works of Michel Crozier and his team at the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations⁸ have played a determining role, demonstrating that public administrative modes of operation are the result of power structures that do not necessarily coincide with legal institutional boundaries. Research efforts in the field are multiplying for two reasons—in addition to the traditional interest of the French in the study of their public sector, the Administration itself has vehemently requested more research in the field. Recently, the evaluation of public policy and management has drawn particular attention, both in the normative sense, through studies on more efficient operating procedures, and in the critical sense, through studies that show the conditions under which an agency operates. Since 1986, with the promotion of regionalization in France, interest in the study of localities has been revived. In the analysis of power structures and procedures for administrative intervention, new horizons have been created.

. . . an emerging school of thought accents the role of free will, not only in studying electoral behavior, but in explaining how institutions function.

International relations and foreign political systems have long been a part of the educational curriculum. Currently, researchers are making an effort to accent the relationship between internal and external problems in the societies they study; going beyond analyses based strictly on

diplomatic strategies, they utilize economic, psychological, and ideological data; the comparative dimension is more and more often integrated. In coming years, it is likely that researchers will be increasingly concerned with defining changes that will occur in the Europe of 1992.

*One of the strong points
of French political science
is the study of electoral
behavior.*

Curiously, few researchers appear to be interested of late in a subject that was once a center of attention and still constitutes a fundamental element of their system of government—political parties. On the other hand, reflection on political ideas and ideologies is very much alive, bolstered by the work of several prominent researchers who have revived interest in classic and contemporary authors.

Where does political science fit into the educational scheme? At the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris,⁹ future public and private-sector leaders are trained, through a diversified curriculum, of which political science is one component. Institutes of political science exist in a number of other French cities, and certain universities, Paris I in particular, have established graduate and undergraduate political science programs.

About the Author

Nicole de Montricher is a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Scientific Attache in the Embassy of France in the United States.

Notes

1. Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research).
2. Centre d'Etudes des Relations Internationales (Center for Studies on International Relations).
3. Centre d'Etudes de la Vie Politique Française (Center for Studies on French Political Life).
4. Centre de Recherches sur les Politiques, l'Administration et le Territoire (Center for Research on Policy, Administration and Planning).
5. Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Vie Locale (Center for Study and Research on Local Life).
6. Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes sur les Sociétés Méditerranéennes (Center for Research and Study on Mediterranean Societies).
7. Interregional Political Observatory.
8. Center for Organizational Sociology.
9. Paris Institute of Political Studies.

References

- Godelier, Maurice, ed. 1982. *Les sciences de l'homme et de la société en France* (report au Ministre de la recherche et de l'industrie). Paris: La documentation française.
- Grawitz, Madeleine, and Jean Leca. 1985. *Traité de Science Politique*. Paris: PUF.
- Guillaume, Marc, ed. 1986. *L'état des sciences sociales en France*. Paris: La Découverte.