

POLITICAL SCIENCE CLUB GUIDE:
WHY AND HOW TO START A CLUB FOR UNDERGRADUATES

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INTRODUCTION

There are many successful political science clubs currently operating on campuses across the country. The primary goal of these clubs is to increase student and campus engagement with the discipline of political science. In addition to this, building a successful student club can bring a range of benefits to both students and departments.

Students benefit from professional development opportunities, potential for increased faculty mentoring, networking with peers, and the opportunity to gain leadership experience. Departments gain a valuable avenue of communication with their most engaged students, in addition to wider exposure on campus. More broadly, political science clubs help create an environment within the department which allows undergrads, faculty, and administrators to interact and support each other's work.

The goal of this guide is to provide some tips and suggestions for both students and faculty interested in founding or revitalizing a political science club. Any type of department on any campus can foster a successful political science club. Not all recommendations included here may be relevant for your campus, but the general structure of a political science club described in this guide may be implemented anywhere.

PART ONE: WHY START A CLUB?

For undergraduates, the complexities of university or college administration can seem daunting at first. Providing ways for undergraduates to connect with the department, faculty, and fellow students is an important way to foster an engaged community. Overall, the more students participate in the life of the department and the discipline, the more likely it is that they will chose to study political science and succeed in their studies.

Political science clubs can help bring students into contact with political science faculty, research, and concepts, as well as involve them in the social life of the department.

Clubs can benefit students in many ways, including:

- **Providing a venue** for discipline-specific professional development events
- **Creating opportunities** for leadership roles within the club—students take the lead on planning club events, organizing fundraisers, and handling marketing and outreach
- **Fostering opportunities for increased student-faculty interactions** outside the classroom
- Giving students direct **access to information** from the department about events, internships, and research opportunities

Potential benefits for departments that have a student club include:

- **Providing a useful information conduit** between the department and its most engaged students, which helps spread the word about department opportunities and events
- **Increasing student engagement**, thereby potentially increasing student majors and recruitment
- **Providing access to rooms on campus** that are free to student organizations but may only be available for a fee to departments
- **Promoting the department and the discipline** more widely among students on campus

Political science clubs can help bring students into contact with political science faculty, research, and concepts, as well as involve them in the social life of the department. This can help them succeed both academically and professionally, even if they choose not to become a political science major.

PART TWO: STARTING AN UNDERGRADUATE POLITICAL SCIENCE CLUB

Two elements are necessary for starting a club or reviving a dormant one: 1) students interested in serving as club officers and members and, 2) a faculty member who is willing to serve as club advisor.

For students taking the lead in organizing a club, a good course of action is to first reach out to friends and classmates who you think might be interested in being club members. Once you have a few interested classmates, the group should approach a potential faculty advisor with questions about how to proceed. Approach a professor who you know—either from class or another campus group. It's best to schedule an in-person meeting to discuss the club and your plans. If the first potential advisor you approach is not able to take on this role, he or she may be helpful in finding a colleague who can assist, or in guiding you to relevant department administrators who can help.

For departments interested in starting a student club, the first steps are similar: finding students who would like to be involved and a faculty member who is interested in serving as the advisor. The more difficult challenge can be finding students who are engaged in the department and are willing to lead a club. If your department would like to begin encouraging students to become more involved, here are some ideas for where to start:

- **Hold a new or prospective majors department open house** once or twice per school year. Ideally faculty members should be available to greet students and engage them, and the Director of Undergraduate Studies should be on hand to answer questions.

- **Hold a "careers day" in the department.** Bring in guest speakers to talk to undergraduates about careers. Recent alumni who are pursuing relevant work or graduate study provide great examples for students about what to do after graduation. The department can also distribute materials on careers and political science at these meetings. You can find careers materials on the APSA website.

- **Provide opportunities for students to excel**, either through department awards and recognition, department-sponsored research opportunities, or distributing information about internships and service-learning programs.

These department opportunities may help students become more involved and foster a group who would like to lead a club. Regardless of whether students, departments, or faculty take the lead in setting up a club, all three of these components must be on board before club activities can begin.



PART THREE: CLUB STRUCTURE

In addition to a faculty advisor and an engaged group of political science students, a club also needs an administrative foundation so that it continues to be active beyond the first group of involved students.

Mission Statement and Constitution
A mission statement and/or club constitution can do a number of things, including: define membership rules; set frequency and expectations for club meetings; define the duties and terms of club officers; set out the goals for club activities; provide explicit guidelines for officer transitions and elections; and outline funding needs and sources.

Here are some examples of political science club constitutions, all of which include mission statements and information about club officers:

- Brookdale Community College, History and Political Science Club Constitution
- College of St. Benedict and St. John, International Affairs Club Constitution
- Georgetown University, International Affairs Club Constitution
- Indiana University, South Bed Political Science Club Constitution
- Rochester Institute of Technology Political Science Club Constitution
- University of Hawai'i at Hilo, Political Science Club Constitution
- Vanderbilt University, Undergraduate Political Science Association Constitution

In terms of membership, most student clubs allow both majors and non-majors to participate, though club officers are usually political science majors. Encouraging the participation of first- and second-year students is also important for the successful transition of leadership over the years.

The constitution also outlines club officers. Most clubs have a similar organizational structure. Student positions usually include, but are not limited to, President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary. The roles generally work as follows:

- **President** and **Vice-President** organize events, initiate activities, and delegate tasks to the rest of the club officers
- **Treasurer** tracks the club's funding and expenditures, keeps an official budget, and helps prepare submissions for funding
- **Secretary** keeps notes on club meetings and handles social media and campus outreach

Other student officer positions and duties can include public relations, web development, events coordinator, club historian, faculty relations, recruitment, and more. Depending on the number of club members and the needs of each club, the officers can determine what types of positions are necessary. Listing all officer positions in the constitution helps codify club structure and facilitate transitions of officers from year to year.

Faculty Advisor

As mentioned, all clubs must have a **faculty advisor**. The advisor is crucial to the success of a club and provides a direct link to the department and other faculty members. It is important for the advisor to take an active role in guiding the club while still allowing the students to take the lead. In years when student leadership may falter, a faculty advisor may also help with recruitment efforts for new club members and officers.

Being a faculty advisor comes with benefits as well. Not only does the advisor get the chance to interact closely with a group of talented and enthusiastic students, but he or she also gets the opportunity to meet invited speakers, take a more visible role on campus, and play a key part in helping the department run smoothly. Advising need not be very time-intensive—it will vary by campus and department, but some club advisors spend just a few hours a month working with a club.

Funding and Dues

Many colleges and universities will provide some funding to chartered student clubs. Many groups also choose to raise funds on their own through **activities** (such as raffles or bake sales) or through **member dues**. Funds are used to pay for speakers to come to campus, for food at events, to buy prizes for club awards, and for club trips.

Club funding structures vary widely—not all clubs have institutional funding, and many do not require member dues. The particular situation on your campus will determine the best structure for club funding. Students and advisors should be prepared to think creatively about how to raise funds beyond just what the institution and members can provide.

Social Media and Outreach

Getting the word out is crucial, and a social media presence is essential to the success of a student club. Every political science club should have a Facebook page, website, and/or Twitter account that is maintained by the executive officers. Updating the online presence of a club on a regular basis will help attract members and make publicizing events easier.

Student newspapers, club fairs, and regular word-of-mouth also help promote a club on campus. Having an event featured in the campus newspaper, for example, is great publicity. School club fairs, which typically happen at the beginning of each fall semester, are also an integral way to let incoming students know about the club and what it does.

Here are some examples of websites, Facebook, and Twitter accounts for political science clubs around the country:

- College of Charleston Political Science Club (Facebook)
- Columbia University, Political Science Students Association (Facebook)
- Grand Rapids Community College, Foreign Affairs Club (Facebook)
- Kent State Political Science Club
- Long Beach City College, Political Science Student Association
- Marist College Political Science Club
- University of Bucharest Political Science Club
- University of California, Berkeley, Undergraduate Political Science Association, UC-Berkeley
- University of North Texas, Political Science Student Association (Twitter)
- University of South Dakota Political Science League (Facebook)
- Wichita State University Political Science Club

The Department

The department plays a key role in supporting the club and also spreading the word to attract members. Department websites often host information about undergraduate clubs and provide technical support for clubs that want to put together a separate website. If the department has a Facebook or Twitter page, those should include updates about club activities. Having faculty and graduate students announce club initiatives before classes and at department events is a great way to promote club activities. Flyers can be put up on department bulletin boards and in faculty offices to help advertise as well.

Pi Sigma Alpha

Pi Sigma Alpha is the national political science honor society for both graduate and upper-level undergraduate students of government in the United States. Political science club membership is often broader than that of a Pi Sigma Alpha chapter, due to Pi Sigma Alpha requirements about majors and grade point averages. Many campuses have a political science club as well as a Pi Sigma Alpha chapter, however, and these groups often overlap, sharing members, faculty advisors, and collaborating on events.



PART FOUR: ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

Once a club has members, a faculty advisor, and an executive board, planning for club activities and events can begin. There are many ways for political science clubs to be active on campus—as the goals of clubs differ, so will events. Overall, though, there are three main areas of student life that political science clubs contribute to:

- Academic discussion, research, and debate
- Careers and professional development
- Political life on campus

The following list of ideas is not exhaustive; activities and events will vary according to club leadership as well as campus and member interest. Many of the activities listed will be for club members or majors primarily, while others will be campus-wide events to which all students and faculty are invited. Having a range of activities can help broaden the reach of the political science club and make it an integral part of life on campus.

Academic Discussion and Debate
These events primarily promote student engagement with political science research and scholarship:

- **Organize talks, lectures and colloquium** led by faculty from the department or from other campuses
- **Set up a research day** or undergraduate research symposia
- **Create an award** for best undergraduate paper or senior thesis
- **Form an undergraduate research workshop** or study group where students can discuss their work with peers
- **Start a book or movie discussion group** led by a faculty member or graduate student
- **Organize student trips** to regional or national political science association conferences

- **Sponsor faculty-student lunches** where students share a meal with a faculty member to discuss their work in a more informal setting

Careers and Professional Development
While most campuses have a careers center, few have career resources specifically on careers for political science majors. The club can help fill this gap:

- **Organize career events** where alumni who majored in political science come back to campus to talk about their current job and career
- **Request that the campus career office give a presentation** tailored to political science undergraduates on possible career sectors and options
- **Sponsor a resume workshop** for graduating students to help them in their job search
- **Set up a peer mentor program** with the help of the department, to connect new majors with upper-level students
- **Distribute materials** on careers and how to apply to grad school, including flyers, booklets and other resources. You can find materials on the APSA website.

Political Life
While political science clubs are non-partisan, they can still be active in promoting interest in politics on campus through events and activities:

- **Bring in off-campus speakers**—local journalists and elected officials, for example—who can speak about their work and show the connections between academic political science concepts and the practice of politics
- **Host election debate parties** during national or statewide elections; these events are often hosted in conjunction with two or more political party organizations on campus
- **Host student debates** on topical political issues, provide a neutral space for political organizations on campus to meet and discuss
- **Organize roundtables** on political and electoral issues, including faculty and off-campus speakers
- **Plan off-campus field trips** to the state legislature or Washington, DC, to meet with officials and learn more about state and national politics and the reality of governing
- **Help register citizens to vote** before local or national elections, either on or off campus

Importantly, many of these events and activities provide networking opportunities for political science students and faculty outside the classroom. If the club focuses on planning even just one or two events per semester that positively contribute to the social and academic life of the department and the campus, then a club is likely to succeed and thrive.

All of these ideas help engage students with the life of the department and with political science more broadly. Creating opportunities for students to engage with their peers and faculty outside the classroom can improve their college experience and foster collegiality in the department.

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If you have any comments or questions about this guide please contact the APSA Departmental Services Program at dsp@apsanet.org.