

Political Theory on the Rise

Government scholars help answer the great “so what” question of political science



When the Department of Government recruited Thomas Pangle in 2004 to become the Joe R. Long Chair in Democratic Studies, the goal was not simply to become a powerhouse in the study of political theory, but to help the department rise to elite status more broadly in political science.

Six years later, a survey in “PS: Political Science and Politics,” the American Political Science Association’s journal of record for the profession, ranked the department’s political theory program one of the top in the country, and Pangle one of the most influential political theorists in the world.

Throughout the history of modern political science, political theory has been central to the discipline, and it remains at its core today.

Many scholars began studying political science out of principled concern for big questions about justice and a belief that politics matters for our present and future quality of life. These are the types of issues that political theorists struggle with daily, and they are why the top political science programs are invariably anchored by a strong political theory component.

In short, every political scientist must defend the relevance of his or her work — in the discipline this is known as the “so what” question.

You got some results? So what?

Enter political theorists, who make their living offering rigorous responses to the “so what” question.

Like the department as a whole, The University of Texas at Austin’s political theory program is intellectually diverse. Areas of expertise range from ancient political thought to contemporary critical race theory, from medieval natural law to modern sociological theory, from the study of classic texts to normative analysis of contemporary public policies, and from American political thought to political theory in comparative context.

Ten faculty members cover these subjects and many more. Within the last five years this group has published a large number of important books with leading publishers.

Pangle's colleagues include Jeffrey Abramson, J. Budziszewski, David Edwards, Benjamin Gregg, Juliet Hooker, Lorraine Pangle, Dana Stauffer, Devin Stauffer and Jeffrey Tulis.

Though diverse in course offerings and faculty research, The University of Texas is especially strong in historical approaches to political philosophy.

The premise of much of this work is that political theory can use the past to broaden questions about, and interpretations of, the present. In these efforts history is not treated as a timeline of progress, but rather as a rich source of deeply informative ideas that have been neglected or missed over time.

Recovering these extraordinary sources of insight requires interpretive methods and skills for which The University of Texas has become very well known.