

Prospective Undergraduates

This page gives you information about why you might think about studying Politics at Trinity College, and about the various ways in which you can do so.

Why study Politics?

Mainly because it's such a fascinating subject as well as being an important one. Politics affects us all in our daily lives. It's easy to think of issues that we all have opinions about. Should government tax the rich to try to achieve greater equality? Should it introduce 'green taxes' in order to protect the environment? Should third-level students have to pay fees? Should abortion be legalised? Should the amount of money the EU spends on the agricultural sector be cut back drastically? How high a priority should third world aid be? All of these questions will be decided through the political process.



That's not to say that the study of politics as an academic subject consists simply of chatting about these or other topics. Rather, it involves, among other things, thinking about how these decisions get made. If it's not possible to keep everyone happy when some issue has to be decided, whose views prevail and why? If governments do not always make what seems to be the most 'rational' decision on economic policy or some other issue, why not? How much say do ordinary people have in policy-making, and is it feasible to make the decision-making process more open? Can governments do pretty much what they want, or are they so constrained by other actors such as

interest groups, the courts, the European Union, the constitution, and the sheer pressure of events, that in practice they have very little freedom of manoeuvre? Questions such as these are at the heart of the study of politics.

And, taking a step back from the debates of contemporary politics, political theorists ponder more fundamental questions, to do with normative issues - the 'should' questions - rather than ones that can be resolved by evidence. These days, pretty much everyone is in favour of justice and democracy - but what do these terms mean? If a society is to be run justly, what would this entail? Such topics have been discussed since the time of the ancient Greeks.

Why study Politics at Trinity specifically?

There are excellent academic and excellent non-academic reasons to come to Trinity to study Politics. The **academic ones** first.

- The Trinity Political Science department is one of the most highly-rated in Europe (it was third in the 2004 'Hix rankings' - see our 'overview' page for more details). This means that students are taught by some of the top researchers in Europe, enthusiasts for their subjects who bring to their students not only the accumulated wisdom of the wider political science community but also the fruits of their own cutting edge research. Undergraduate teaching is a core activity of the Political Science department and one that receives top priority;



- Students are given lectures by world-renowned authorities in their field, and these are supplemented by small-group tutorials given by teaching assistants, which enables them to discuss, with the teaching assistants and with each other, the ideas outlined in the lectures. Continuous assessment is built into all courses.
- A degree from Trinity College Dublin is recognised both nationally and internationally as a mark of quality;
- In Trinity, all degree programmes run for four years. In the final year of the Political Science programme there is real 'value added' for students as courses are characteristically taught through seminars, enabling students to learn the vital skills of small-group discussion and presentation;
- In addition, the Trinity College Library is second to none on the island of Ireland, a fantastic resource for students and staff alike.

The **non-academic reasons** include the outstanding social life for which Trinity is renowned.

- These include the range of clubs and societies (including a Politics Society, plus branches / cumainn of all the political parties and a range of other groups and movements), the debating opportunities, and the chance to get involved with a large number of student publications.
- Of course, Trinity's location in the centre of Dublin means that not only is the university easy to get to, it's also within strolling distance of all the facilities that a dynamic capital city has to



offer. Art galleries and museums; theatres and cinemas; eating places to suit all budgets; cafes on every corner, including one directly below the Political Science department; modern super-pubs and other pubs that retain the ambience and traditions of earlier decades; the major media organisations; and, for the Politics student, the government, the Houses of the Oireachtas, and the civil service. Five minutes after leaving a lecture, you can be sitting in the Visitors' Gallery in Leinster House listening to a Dáil debate, or discussing the lecture topic in a Temple Bar café with a friend.

What's the difference between Politics and Political Science?

Political science is the study of politics. The term 'science' does not mean that we believe that the behaviour of human beings is completely predictable or that we imagine we can create laboratory-like conditions when we study politics. Rather, it means that where possible we try to study political phenomena in a systematic and methodical manner, searching for patterns rather than examining each event in detail for its own sake. Ideally, we will be able to identify causal relationships: that is, instead of simply observing that 'X happens sometimes and doesn't happen at other times', we will be able to say, based on our studies, that 'the presence of conditions A, B and C significantly increases the likelihood that X will take place'. That said, the different approaches taken by researchers in the field do not impinge greatly on the way undergraduate courses are taught. The emphasis is always on delivering lively courses that better equip the student to understand the world around us.



How is Politics taught at Trinity?

There's a wide range of courses on offer (details for the current academic year are on our Undergraduate Courses page). You will find:

- Courses that deal with the politics of individual countries, such as Ireland and the USA
- Courses that cover another area of the world, such as Western Europe or the European Union
- Courses on international relations
- Courses in political theory that address normative issues such as why citizens should obey their rulers, or how and why power comes to appear legitimate
- Courses in which students discuss contemporary political issues
- Courses teaching the methodological skills needed to study politics
- And courses on specialised topics for final-year students, such as political parties.



Any opportunities to study abroad?

Yes. The Department of Political Science is a partner in Socrates exchanges with the Institut d'études politiques in Strasbourg (France) and the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany). This offers opportunities for Trinity students to spend some time studying abroad (the International Student Affairs office pages have some useful information). Other exchange schemes are scheduled to come on stream in the near future.



But what about career prospects?

Some people might fear that while studying Politics could be fascinating for four years, after graduation they will be at a disadvantage compared with their counterparts who opted for less interesting but more marketable degree options.



Not so. For one thing, students usually do better when studying subjects that engage them than ones that they are studying under duress or pressure. Most employers will be more impressed by a strong degree performance in a subject that the student chose out of genuine interest than by a less good performance in a subject that the student chose out of a sense of duty. Earning a degree, as is often said, is to a large extent about 'training the mind'. In a rapidly changing world, much of the specific information that you take in during your undergraduate degree studies might not hold true for very long, but if you have learned how to analyse information, how to assess the relative merits of competing arguments, how to evaluate evidence, how to identify the most important aspects of any issue, and how to discuss topics in a small-group setting, these are skills that will stand to you for life. Teaching those skills is at the core of the way Politics is taught in Trinity. Of course, there are careers for which a demonstrated interest in Politics is a definite plus and gives you a real head start. Journalism, other kinds of media work, the civil service, public relations, anything in business that requires knowing how government works, work in international organisations such as the EU or a not-for-profit organisation, all come into this category. A

demonstrated knowledge of how the world works is obviously an asset for many types of career. An increasing number of undergraduates go on to do further study by means of postgraduate work. And, with a Politics degree, you could even get elected as a TD!

How to study Politics in Trinity

Studying Political Science in Trinity does not entail four years of studying nothing but politics. Indeed, the great majority of our students combine Political Science with another subject, such as Business Studies, Economics, History, Philosophy or Sociology.



There are six ways to enter TCD for those wanting a degree wholly or jointly in political science:

1. Through BESS. This permits students to study either for a single honors degree in political science, or a joint honors degree in which political science is combined with Economics, Sociology and Business Studies. All BESS students have a common first year and students begin to focus their studies more in later years.
2. Through History and Political Science. This involves the joint study of History and Political Science for all four years, with students taking courses in both departments. A choice may be made to confine one's studies to either History or Political Science in the final year.
3. Through Philosophy and Political Science. This involves the joint study of Philosophy and Political Science for all four years, with students taking courses in both departments. A choice may be made to confine one's studies to either Philosophy or Political Science in the final year.

4. Through the PPES (Philosophy, Political Science, Economics and Sociology) degree: a unique opportunity to study these four subjects together.
5. Through the new Law and Political Science degree (first entrants September 2009).
6. Through the new Political Science and geography degree (first entrants September 2009). You can find more information on all these programmes on the department's main Undergraduate website.

How to apply

Admission to all courses and programmes in Trinity College Dublin is not handled by individual departments but, rather, by the College's Admissions Office. Course requirements can be viewed on the current students undergraduate page. Certain courses in Political Science are also open to students in European Studies.



In addition, courses in Political Science are taken every year by visiting students, who are in Trinity College for just one academic year or even less. Visiting students are very welcome to take the department's first-year, second-year and third-year courses, though at present most of its final-year courses are not open to visiting students. Visiting students taking Political Science courses are expected to fulfil the same course requirements, in terms of coursework and exams, as TCD students. There is more information for visiting students in the department's undergraduate handbook.