

Political Scientists as Politicians and Public Officials: Elisabetta Gualmini

Elisabetta Gualmini is a Full Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna. She holds a Phd in Political Science (University of Florence) and has been visiting scholar at the WZB in Berlin, the Humboldt Universitat in Berlin, the London School of Economics, the UC Berkeley and the UC Los Angeles. Between 2011 and 2014 she was the President of the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo. She has written almost 10 monographies in the field of labour policies and comparative public administration and more than 30 essays. In 2015 she has been appointed Vice-President of the Emilia Romagna Regional Government, so she is temporarily on a leave from the University.

IPS: Can you give us a glimpse into a typical work day of yours?

Well, my day starts quite early as I have to go through the national and local press and help my children get ready for school. After that, I usually arrive at my office around 9.30 am where I hold regular meetings with several stakeholders in social and housing policies, trade unions, associations, mayors, and other public administrators. My agenda also includes formal political meetings, for example with the regional legislative assembly. Once a day per week I organize meetings outside Bologna to meet with local stakeholders and policymakers, in order to explain what we do at the regional level and get feedback on how to improve our legislative activity. Let me add that many meetings—the crucial ones—are usually scheduled late in the evening. Not exactly an easy situation for a woman who is also a mother. A bad habit, unfortunately widespread not only in political activity.

IPS: Reflecting on the process that led you to hold a critical position for the public administration of the Regione Emilia-Romagna, would you characterize such an outcome as the result of fortuitous circumstances or something that you deliberately chose to do?

Well, I never ruled out working in public administration. Actually, I have always thought I would like that. At the same time, I think it is not possible to think of a political career as a long-term one. Hence, I am grateful to my academic job as it offers me the chance of gaining an extraordinary first-hand experience of a world I have always studied.

As for my current position, this is an opportunity that opened up suddenly. At the beginning I was left wondering whether to accept the offer, because I wanted to conclude my term at the Istituto Cattaneo. I ultimately decided to give it a try when I was offered the vice-president position: a position that offers me the possibility to oversee all public policies that are formulated at the regional level.

IPS: As a political scientist and a scholar of public policy, what do you conceive as the most important contributions that our profession brings to the political table?

I think we bring significant contributions. Let me offer a couple of examples based on my recent experience at the Regione. In my experience, knowing about how public policies are formulated and adopted, as well as their implementation, has certainly been a useful tool and a personal contribution to the political processes I participate in. Furthermore, our skills to collect evidence, organize and present arguments is important for engaging public audiences. Our theoretical background allows us to make connections among seemingly different issues and is a skill that citizens appreciate. I think voters have become more demanding and are no longer satisfied with slogans: they look for serious interlocutors and political scientists can provide citizens with insights on the political and social reality of our time.

In spite of all the potential advantages that stem from our professional activity, we should also be aware of the risks. Specifically, people that come from academia can often be perceived as too theoretical and thus detached from reality. As a result, I think it is important to maintain a pragmatic approach to politics even if we rely on our theoretical and methodological toolkit. In other words, we should remember that our knowledge is not written in stone, but that pragmatism is required to reach those compromises at the heart of political decisions.

IPS: Keeping with the theme regarding the two-way relationship between academic work and political engagement, in what respects does public involvement improve academic work and how?

Political experience provides political scientists with enormous knowledge about the objects they study. To start with, and again based on my experience, active involvement means getting a hand on the veto powers and points that hinder the working of public administrations, stifling ideas and innovation. Still, this experience provides practical knowledge of how to solve problems that citizens care about. I think that it will be useful to go back to an academic class and tell students about the changes in the social-economic fabric of our country that I am presiding over in my role. Over the past few years, the social system we used to know has significantly been transformed as the categories of wealth and poverty have changed, with enormous consequences for how to formulate social policies. Again, however, caution is needed. What I mean is that moving back from the political arena to academia requires leaving aside all the ideologies that characterize the former setting.

IPS: What is your take on the relevance of political scientists to the public and political debate? Do you think that public engagement is a recipe for relevance or not?

I think that there is nothing wrong with political scientists becoming actively engaged in politics. We can provide some important value by sharing our knowledge and passion with the political communities we live in. Furthermore, as we have the luxury (and I think it really is so) to take a sabbatical from our profession to participate in political life, we can still preserve the boundary that separates the academic work from the political one. But let me reiterate that I think it is important for political scientists to make their voices heard, especially at a time when we are going through historical socio-economic changes.

IPS: But are our voices heard? Or are those of colleagues from other disciplines “more heard” than ours?

Well, I think it is fair to say that political scientists are not generally given pride of place in political debates and decisions in Italy, especially as compared to lawyers and economists. When institutional reforms are on the political agenda, policymakers tend to rely on legal scholars rather than on political scientists. In general, there is a widespread interpretation of political scientists as scholars working almost exclusively on electoral systems or public opinion analyses. And this, of course, does not give justice to our discipline. Furthermore, if we think of the range of policies that policymakers deal with, then political scientists have certainly more to say than legal scholars.