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## Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition

# Sociologists and Political Scientists

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## Significant Points

- The vast majority of bachelor's degree holders in sociology and political science find employment in niche areas with specialized titles, such as market analyst, research assistant, writer, or policy analyst.
- Employment growth of sociologists is projected to grow much faster than average; political scientists, faster than the average.
- Candidates who hold a master's or Ph.D. degree will have the best employment prospects and advancement opportunities; competition for teaching positions, while keen, should ease as the expected number of retirements increases.
- Quantitative and qualitative skills are important for all workers.

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## Nature of the Work

*Sociologists and political scientists* study all aspects of human society and political systems—from social behavior and the origin of social groups to the origin, development, and operation of political systems. Their research provides insights into different ways individuals, groups, and governments make decisions, exercise power, and respond to change. Through their studies and analyses, sociologists and political scientists suggest solutions to social, business, personal, and governmental problems. In fact, many work as public *policy analysts* for government or private organizations. (*Archaeologists, anthropologists, geographers, and historians*, whose work is closely related to that of sociologists and political scientists, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Sociologists study society and social behavior by examining the groups, cultures, organizations, and social institutions people form. They also study the activities in which people participate, including activities conducted in social, religious, political, economic, and business organizations. They study the behavior of, and interaction among, groups, organizations, institutions, and nations, and how they react to phenomena such as the spread of technology, crime, social movements, and epidemics of illness. They also trace the origin and growth of these groups and interactions. Sociologists analyze how social influences affect different individuals and groups, and the ways organizations and institutions affect the daily lives of those same people. To analyze these social patterns, sociologists usually begin by designing research projects that incorporate a variety of methods, including historical analysis, comparative analysis, and quantitative and qualitative techniques. Through this process of applied research, they construct theories and produce information that attempts to explain certain social trends or that will enable people to make better decisions or manage their affairs more effectively. The results of sociological research aid educators, lawmakers, administrators, and others who are interested in resolving social problems and formulating public policy. Most sociologists work in one or more specialties, such as social organization, stratification, and mobility; racial and ethnic relations; education; the family; social psychology; urban, rural, political, and comparative sociology; gender relations; demography; gerontology; criminology; and sociological practice.

Political scientists conduct research on a wide range of subjects, such as relations between the United States and other countries, the institutions and political life of nations, the politics of small towns or major metropolises, and the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. Studying and evaluating topics such as public opinion, political decisionmaking, ideology, and public policy, they analyze the structure and operation of governments, as well as various other entities. Depending on the topic, a political scientist might analyze a public-opinion survey, study election results or public documents, or interview public officials. Occasionally, they may collaborate with government economists to assess the effects of specific changes in legislation or public policy, such as the effects of the deregulation of industries or of changes in Social Security. Through academic publications, written reports, or public presentations, political scientists present their research reports and often identify new issues for research and analysis. Many political scientists forecast political, social, and economic trends.

Political scientists frequently work as policy analysts for government or in labor, political, or professional organizations, some of which are nonprofit. These workers gather and analyze information to assist in the planning, development, review, and interpretation of government or industrial policies. They use the results of their research to raise public awareness of social issues, such as crime prevention, access to healthcare, and protection of the environment, hoping to influence government action. Most political scientists—about 63 percent—work for the Federal Government. Some find work in research and development firms performing work for the Federal Government on a contract basis. The relatively few who work in the Foreign Service may help formulate and implement foreign policy.

**Work environment.** Most sociologists and political scientists have regular hours. Generally working behind a desk, either alone or in collaboration with other social scientists, they read and write research articles or reports. Many experience the pressures of writing and publishing, as well as those associated with deadlines and tight schedules. Some sociologists may be required to attend meetings. Political scientists on foreign assignment must adjust to unfamiliar cultures, climates, and languages.

Sociologists and political scientists employed by colleges and universities usually have flexible work schedules, often dividing their time among teaching, research, writing, consulting, and administrative responsibilities. Those who teach in these settings are classified as postsecondary teachers. (See the statement on teachers—postsecondary elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)



*Sociologists study the behavior of groups, organizations, institutions, and nations, and how they react to phenomena such as the spread of technology, crime, social movements, and epidemics of illness.*

## **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

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Some entry-level positions for sociologists and political scientists are available to those with a bachelor's degree, but higher degrees are required for the majority of positions. Prospects need good quantitative and qualitative skills.

**Education and training.** Whether working in government, industry, research organizations, or consulting firms, sociologists and political scientists with a bachelor's degree usually qualify for entry-level positions as a market analyst, research assistant, writer, or policy analyst. Graduates with master's degrees in applied specialties usually qualify for most administrative and research positions, while a Ph.D. degree is typically required for college and university teaching

positions.

Training in statistics and mathematics is essential for many political scientists, who increasingly are using mathematical and quantitative research methods. The ability to use computers for research purposes is mandatory in most disciplines.

Many sociology and political science students can benefit greatly from internships. Numerous government agencies, as well as nonprofit and other organizations, offer internships or volunteer research opportunities. Also, the vast majority of colleges and universities have student organizations devoted to specific public policy issues, and many provide opportunities for debates, often hosted by the political science department.

While in college, aspiring sociologists and political scientists should gain experience gathering and analyzing data, conducting interviews or surveys, and writing reports on their findings. This experience can prove invaluable later in obtaining a full-time position in the field, because much of the work, especially in the beginning, may center on these duties.

**Other qualifications.** Sociologists and political scientists need excellent written and oral communication skills to report research findings and to collaborate on research. Successful workers also need intellectual curiosity and creativity because they constantly are seeking new information about people, things, and ideas. The ability to think logically and methodically also is essential in analyzing complicated issues, such as the relative merits of various forms of government.

**Advancement.** Many sociologists and political scientists choose to teach in their field, often while pursuing their own research. These workers are usually classified as postsecondary teachers. The minimum requirement for most positions in colleges and universities is a Ph.D. degree. Graduates with a master's degree in sociology or political science may qualify for teaching positions in community colleges.

## Employment

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Sociologists and political scientists held about 9,000 jobs in 2008, of which 4,900 were held by sociologists. Most sociologists worked as researchers, administrators, and counselors for a wide range of employers. The industries that employed the largest number of sociologists in 2008 were scientific research and development services, social advocacy organizations, and State and local government, excluding education and hospitals.

Many sociologists—about 37 percent—teach in colleges and universities and in secondary and elementary schools. (For more information, see [teachers—postsecondary](#) and [teachers—kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary](#) elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Political scientists held about 4,100 jobs in 2008. About 63 percent worked for the Federal Government. Most of the remainder worked in scientific research and development services and religious, grantmaking, civic, professional, and similar organizations.

## Job Outlook

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Employment growth of sociologists and political scientists is projected to grow **much faster than the average**. Job opportunities should be best for jobseekers with a master's or PhD degree in a social science and with strong quantitative skills.

**Employment change.** Overall employment of sociologists and political scientists is expected to grow 21 percent from 2008 to 2018, much faster than the average for all occupations. Sociologists will experience **much faster than average** job growth because the incorporation of sociology into research in other fields continues to increase. Sociologists possess broad training and education in analytical, methodological, conceptual, and quantitative and qualitative analysis and research, so their skills can be applied to many different occupations. As a result, many workers with sociology backgrounds will find work in niche areas with specialized titles, such as market analyst, research assistant, writer, and policy analyst. Some sociologists may find work conducting policy research for consulting firms, and their knowledge of society and social behavior may be used as well by a variety of companies in product development, marketing, and advertising. Demand for sociologists also will stem from growth in the number of social, political, and business associations and organizations, including many nonprofit organizations, to conduct various evaluations and

statistical work.

Employment of political scientists is projected to grow faster than average, reflecting the growing importance of public policy and research. Demand for political science research is growing because of increasing interest in politics, foreign affairs, and public policy, including social and environmental policy issues, healthcare, and immigration. Political scientists will use their knowledge of political institutions to further the interests of nonprofit, political lobbying, and social and civic organizations. Job growth also may be driven by the budget constraints of public resources. As a growing population exerts excess demand on certain public services, political scientists will be needed to analyze the effects and efficiencies of those services, as well as to offer solutions.

Job prospects. In addition to opportunities arising from employment growth, a growing number of job openings will come from the need to replace those who retire, enter teaching or other occupations, or leave their social science occupation for other reasons.

People seeking sociologist and political scientist positions may face competition for jobs, and those with higher educational attainment will have the best prospects. Many jobs in policy, research, or marketing, for which bachelor's degree holders qualify, are not advertised exclusively as sociologist or political scientist positions. Because of the wide range of skills and knowledge possessed by these workers, many compete for jobs with other workers, such as anthropologists and archaeologists, geographers, historians, market and survey researchers, psychologists, engineers, and statisticians.

Some people with a Ph.D. degree in sociology will find opportunities as university faculty rather than as applied sociologists. Although there will be competition for tenured positions, the number of faculty expected to retire over the decade and the increasing number of part-time or short-term faculty positions will lead to better opportunities in colleges and universities than in the past. The growing importance and popularity of social science subjects in secondary schools also is strengthening the demand for social science teachers at that level.

People who have a master's or Ph.D. degree in political science, who are skilled in quantitative and qualitative techniques, and who also have specialized skills should have the best opportunities. Some will find jobs in the Federal Government as the expected number of retirements increases.

## Projections Data

### Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2008	Projected Employment, 2018	Change, 2008-18		Detailed Statistics	
				Number	Percent		
<b>Sociologists and political scientists</b>	—	9,000	10,900	1,900	21	—	—
<b>Sociologists</b>	19-3041	4,900	6,000	1,100	22	[PDF]	[XLS]
<b>Political scientists</b>	19-3094	4,100	4,900	800	19	[PDF]	[XLS]

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

## Earnings

Median annual wages of sociologists in May 2008 were \$68,570. The middle 50 percent earned between \$51,110 and \$92,220. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$40,720, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$122,130. Median annual wages of sociologists in scientific research and development services were \$72,170.

Median annual wages of political scientists in May 2008 were \$104,130. The middle 50 percent earned between \$74,040 and \$124,490. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$47,220, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$146,880.

In March 2009, the Federal Government's average salary was \$100,824 for sociologists. Beginning salaries were higher in selected areas of the country where the prevailing local pay level was higher.

**For the latest wage information:**

The above wage data are from the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) survey program, unless otherwise noted. For the latest National, State, and local earnings data, visit the following pages:

- political scientists
- sociologists

## **Related Occupations**

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The duties and training of sociologists are similar to those of other social scientists, including the following:

Economists

Market and survey researchers

Psychologists

Social scientists, other

Urban and regional planners

Many sociologists conduct surveys, study social problems, teach, and work in museums, performing tasks similar to those of the following professionals:

Archivists, curators, and museum technicians

Counselors

Social workers

Statisticians

Teachers—kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary

Teachers—postsecondary

Political scientists often research the legal system and analyze current events, as do the following workers:

Judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers

Lawyers

News analysts, reporters, and correspondents

Paralegals and legal assistants

## **Sources of Additional Information**

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**Disclaimer:**

Links to non-BLS Internet sites are provided for your convenience and do not constitute an endorsement.

Information about careers in sociology is available from:

- American Sociological Association, 1430 K St. NW., Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005. Internet: <http://www.asanet.org>

For information about careers in political science, contact:

- American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20036. Internet: <http://www.apsanet.org>

For information about careers in public policy, contact:

- National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, 1029 Vermont Ave. NW., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005. Internet: <http://www.naspaa.org>

For information about careers in policy analysis, an important task for some social scientists, see "Policy analysts: Shaping society through research and problem-solving," online at <http://www.bls.gov/opath/ooq/2007/spring/arto3.pdf> and in the spring 2007 issue of the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*.

## O\*NET-SOC Code Coverage

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Get more information from O\*NET—the Occupational Information Network:

O\*NET provides comprehensive information on key characteristics of workers and occupations. For information on a specific occupation, select the appropriate link below. For more information on O\*NET, visit their [homepage](#).

- [Political Scientists \(19-3094.00\)](#)
- [Sociologists \(19-3041.00\)](#)

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**U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections** Suite 2135,  
2 Massachusetts Avenue, NE Washington, DC 20212-0001

<http://www.bls.gov/oco/> | Telephone: (202) 691-5700 | Fax: (202) 691-5745 [Do you have a question about the Occupational Outlook Handbook?](#)